



Legislative Assembly of Alberta

The 31st Legislature
First Session

Standing Committee
on
Families and Communities

Ministry of Education
Consideration of Main Estimates

Tuesday, March 12, 2024
8 a.m.

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**Legislative Assembly of Alberta
The 31st Legislature
First Session**

Standing Committee on Families and Communities

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Goehring, Nicole, Edmonton-Castle Downs (NDP), Deputy Chair

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Standing Committee on Families and Communities

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Ministry of Education

Hon. Demetrios Nicolaides, Minister

Lora Pillipow, Deputy Minister

8 a.m.

Tuesday, March 12, 2024

[Ms Lovely in the chair]

**Ministry of Education
Consideration of Main Estimates**

The Chair: All right. I would like to call the meeting to order and welcome everyone in attendance. The committee has under consideration the estimates of the Ministry of Education for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2025.

I'd ask that we go around the table and have members introduce themselves for the record. Minister, when we get to you, please would you kindly introduce the officials who are joining you at the table? My name is Jackie Lovely, and I'm the MLA for the Camrose constituency and chair of this committee. We'll start to my right.

Mr. Boitchenko: Andrew Boitchenko, MLA for Drayton Valley-Devon.

Mr. Lundy: Brandon Lundy, MLA for Leduc-Beaumont.

Mrs. Petrovic: Chelsae Petrovic, MLA for Livingstone-Macleod.

Mr. Singh: Good morning, everyone. Peter Singh, MLA, Calgary-East.

Mr. Long: Martin Long, the MLA for West Yellowhead.

The Chair: Minister, please go ahead.

Mr. Nicolaides: Sure. Myself, Demetrios Nicolaides, Minister of Education. Starting at my very left here, Kindy Joseph, assistant deputy minister, program and system support; to my immediate left, Lora Pillipow, deputy minister; to my right, Jeff Willan, assistant deputy minister of financial services and capital planning; and further to my right, Emily Ma, executive director of K to 12 fiscal oversight.

Ms Chapman: Amanda Chapman, MLA, Calgary-Beddington.

Ms Goehring: Good morning. Nicole Goehring, MLA for Edmonton-Castle Downs and deputy chair of this committee.

Mr. Ellingson: Good morning. Court Ellingson, MLA for Calgary-Foothills.

The Chair: All right. Okay. There we go.

A few housekeeping items to address before we turn to the business at hand. Please note that the microphones are operated by *Hansard* staff. Committee proceedings are live streamed on the Internet and broadcast on Alberta Assembly TV. The audio- and videostream and transcripts of meetings can be accessed via the Legislative Assembly website. Members participating remotely are encouraged to turn on your camera while speaking, but I don't think we have anyone remotely. Please set your cellphones and other devices to silent for the duration of the meeting.

All right. With regard to speaking rotation and time limits, hon. members, the main estimates for the Ministry of Education shall be considered for six hours. Standing Order 59.01 sets out the process for consideration of the main estimates in legislative policy committees. Suborder 59.01(6) sets out the speaking rotation for this meeting. The speaking rotation chart is available on the committee's internal website, and hard copies have been provided to the ministry officials at the table. For each segment of the

meeting, blocks of speaking time will be combined only if both the minister and member agree. If debate is exhausted prior to the six hours, the ministry's estimates are deemed to have been considered for the time allotted in the main estimates schedule and the committee will adjourn. Should members have any questions regarding speaking times or rotation, please e-mail or message the committee clerk to my left about the process.

With the concurrence of the committee I will call a five-minute break near the midpoint of the meeting; however, the three-hour clock will continue to run. Does anyone oppose having a break? All right. We shall have a break.

Ministry officials who are present may, at the direction of the minister, address the committee. Ministry officials seated in the gallery, if called upon, have access to the microphone in the gallery area and are asked to please introduce themselves for the record prior to commencing.

Pages are available to deliver notes or other materials between the gallery and the table. Attendees in the gallery may not approach the table. Space permitting, opposition caucus staff may sit at the table to assist their members; however, members have priority to sit at the table at all times.

Points of order will be dealt with as they arise, and individual speaking times will be paused; however, the block of speaking time and the overall three-hour meeting clock will continue to run.

Any written material provided in response to questions raised during the main estimates should be tabled by the minister in the Assembly for the benefit of all members.

Finally, the committee should have the opportunity to hear both the questions and the answers without interruption during estimates debate. Debate, please, flows through the chair at all times, including instances when speaking time is shared between a member and the minister.

I would now invite the Minister of Education to begin with your opening remarks. You have 10 minutes, sir.

Mr. Nicolaides: Sorry. I can't remember, Chair. Am I supposed to press the button, or does it come on automatically?

The Chair: I think *Hansard* is going to operate it, so no need to press the button.

Mr. Nicolaides: Thanks for the refresher.

Thank you, Chair. Good morning, everyone. I'm pleased to be here today to discuss Alberta Education's 2024 budget. I've introduced the folks to my left and right. However, we have additional folks joining us behind me: Meghann Eagle, assistant deputy minister of system excellence; Heather von Hauff, assistant deputy minister of strategic services and governance; Jennifer Cassidy, assistant deputy minister of curriculum; Boris Contreras, assistant deputy minister of First Nations, Métis and Inuit education directorate; and Erin Owens, executive director of capital planning.

It's important to me as Minister of Education that our children and all students in our province are successful. I'm proud to say that we are providing opportunities for students to form the foundations for successful and fulfilling lives and offering a variety of pathways for students to pursue their career interest to succeed in Alberta's dynamic job market. We continue to support enrolment growth to allow school authorities to hire more education staff, including teachers, educational assistants, bus drivers, and other school support staff. We continue to promote positive mental health and provide additional investments to help address classroom complexity by increasing access to qualified professionals and specialized learning supports. We continue to strengthen career education opportunities through investments in dual credit

programs, collegiate schools, registered apprenticeship programs, and off-campus education. We also continue to invest in new and modernized schools and learning supports for students of all abilities.

The recently tabled budget supports these education priorities and more. Budget '24 builds on our commitment to deliver a world-class education that sets Alberta students on a lifelong path to success. Education's budget will reach an all-time high of almost \$9.3 billion in the '24-25 fiscal year, an increase of more than \$393 million, or 4.4 per cent, from the previous year. With this budget the education system will spend over \$46 million each day students are in school. Our goal is to drive as many dollars as possible into the classroom. We give school authorities maximum flexibility in how they manage their resources as they know what's best for their own students. More than 98 per cent of Education's operating budget flows to school authorities who deliver education services to students.

To address enrolment growth, over the next three years we will be providing more than \$1.2 billion to our school authorities. This funding can be used to hire additional teachers and classroom support staff so school authorities can manage class sizes and the growing number of students, with \$259 million provided in '24-25 alone. The enrolment funding is expected to support the hiring of more than 3,100 teachers, educational assistants, and support staff over the next three years.

To help address complex classrooms, we're providing \$44 million in the '24-25 year so school authorities can add staffing supports to complex classrooms and give students the focus, time, and attention they need. Of this \$44 million, \$1 million will be used to increase the number of educational assistant graduates in the province through a provincial educational assistant training program that will support training for current or aspiring educational assistants.

We have committed more than \$1.5 billion to support specialized learning needs and groups of students who may require additional support from school authorities through the learning support funding grants. This suite of grants includes the specialized learning support grant, program unit funding grant, English as an additional language grant, the refugee student grant, the school nutrition grant, classroom complexity grant, and several others.

We continue our support for the school nutrition program by providing school authorities with \$20 million for the program in the '24-25 school year.

I'm pleased to say that through Budget '24 we are strengthening the program unit funding grant to ensure programming and funding addresses the educational needs of children with severe disabilities or delays. We've increased funding by almost \$6 million in the '24-25 fiscal year and \$10 million in subsequent years. This additional investment will allow for two enrolment dates, September and February, and ensure that all children enrolled and eligible for program unit funding will be funded. Our youngest, most vulnerable learners will receive timely early education supports through the addition of more spaces and programs being offered over time.

We are also increasing our investment in student transportation to support system changes and more students being eligible for services. We will provide almost \$493 million to school jurisdictions, an increase of about \$80 million, or 19 per cent, from the previous year and another \$23 million to accredited independent schools and private ECS operators in the '24-25 fiscal year. This strong financial commitment will support a safe transportation system for more than 335,000 students across the province.

8:10

The fuel price contingency program has also been continued to help off-set the impact of fuel price increases for school authorities by keeping fuel prices at a base rate of \$1.25 per litre. To help address concerns about driver shortages, recruitment, and retention, Alberta Education introduced a grant in April of '23 to compensate new school bus drivers for the time it takes to complete their training. This grant has supported the training of more than 650 new school bus drivers, which has had a positive impact on the driver shortage challenges school boards and school contractors have been facing. School boards are now reporting that almost all routes have a full-time, permanent driver.

Curriculum implementation also remains a priority of the ministry. We continue to make investments in curriculum implementation, with \$34 million in '24-25 to support teacher professional learning opportunities and the acquisition of quality teaching and learning resources, which are both critical to successful implementation.

We're also working in partnership with schools, communities, postsecondary institutions, and industry to offer a wide range of exciting and rewarding learning opportunities for students. Dual credit opportunities enable students to earn credits for high school and postsecondary studies at the same time, allowing them to explore their passions and career options while studying in high school. School boards, postsecondary institutions, and industry view this initiative as a vital way to improve high school completion rates and build a qualified, educated, and engaged workforce.

We also continue our strong support of several other hands-on learning programs with the public education system such as career and technology studies apprenticeship pathways and registered apprenticeship programs. These important programs provide experiential, hands-on learning to bridge students to trade designations and jobs. Budget '24 also invests \$12 million for dual credit and to enhance ECS programming over the next three years.

We are committed as well to improving education outcomes for First Nations, Métis, and Inuit students. In Budget '24 we are providing approximately \$86 million in the '24-25 school year so that school authorities can provide system, program, and instructional supports that improve education outcomes for First Nations, Métis, and Inuit students.

With respect to capital we are also committed to building and modernizing schools across the province. We are investing \$2.1 billion over the next three years to build and modernize schools across the province: \$1.9 billion is for planning, design, and construction of new schools; \$103 million will be invested in modular classrooms; and \$123 million will support infrastructure needs of collegiate and public charter schools. In addition, the capital plan includes \$381 million over three years for the capital maintenance and renewal program.

Budget '24 advances 43 priority school projects across the province, with 19 projects moving to full construction, the highest number in seven years. These school projects will provide new and improved student spaces for approximately 35,000 students. Including the 43 projects announced in '24, there are now a total of 98 school projects under way at various stages.

In closing, Alberta's education system is well supported through this year's budget. We've listened to our education partners to ensure we are meeting their needs and addressing their challenges. At the same time we are being responsible with hard-earned tax dollars of Albertans. Once again, we are providing a record level of funding to the education system so that our students can receive the world-class education they deserve.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

I see that we have one more person who's joined us. Please introduce yourself.

Member Brar: Hello, everyone. My name is Gurinder Brar. I'm the MLA for Calgary-North East.

The Chair: Welcome. Thank you for joining us today.

We'll now begin the question-and-answer portion of the meeting. For the first 60 minutes members of the Official Opposition and the minister may speak.

Hon. members, you'll be able to see the timer for the speaking block both in the committee room and on Microsoft Teams. Members, you can see if there's a change now. It's just on the very bottom here, where it says "block" on either side of the room.

Let's start. Member, would you like to combine your time with the minister today?

Ms Chapman: I would be happy to combine time.

The Chair: Minister, what's your preference?

Mr. Nicolaides: Sure. That's fine.

The Chair: Combine? Okay. Fantastic.

The block of shared time is 20 minutes, during which time you may go back and forth with questions, comments, and responses. However, neither participant may speak for longer than 10 minutes at a time.

Please proceed.

Ms Chapman: Okay. Thank you so much. Through the chair, I'd like to thank everyone who's here today to answer questions as we dig into the 2024 Education budget. This is my first budget estimate. I'm looking forward to getting a clearer understanding of the second-largest line item in the government's operating expense.

We've prepared questions on a number of topics within this budget, but I'd like to start today with the capital plan. Again through the chair, I'm sure the minister will have heard from his urban school boards. Calgary, Edmonton, and their surrounding communities have been sounding the alarm for a few years now. CBE is at 92 per cent utilization this year. They added 7,000 of the 28,000 new students in Alberta, and they're going to be at 100 per cent utilization within two years. Edmonton Catholic schools saw a nearly 8 per cent enrolment growth this school year and are sitting at 88 per cent utilization. High schools in the Calgary Catholic system are already 100 per cent full. Edmonton public added 5,800 students this year and has had to grow to accommodate an addition of 26,000 students over the last 10 years. The growth we're seeing in our big cities is really putting enormous pressure on our education system.

In 2023 this government did change the process by which school capital projects moved through approvals. Prior to that time there was quite a straightforward process of approving design and construction funding. Schools that received design funding moved through to the next stage of construction funding in the next year. Since 2023 we've got this new, four-step process of announcing, preplanning, planning, design and construction funding. This was billed as, quote, transparency for school authorities to see where they are in the pipeline of school builds. When this process was announced, the Education minister said, "This is a way for us as government to be very transparent and open with school authorities so that they can actually see where they are on the list."

Even though we're just two years into this new process, it has become abundantly clear that whatever the intention, it is certainly

not working that way. For example, Budget 2023 included design funding for 20 schools across the province, but Budget 2024 only includes full construction for 12 schools. So 10 of the schools that received that design funding in 2023 did not progress to full construction funding in the following year. In fact, there are a number of schools in Budget 2024 that zipped through a bunch of the phases. There were three that came right up from preplanning or planning and then a number of projects – I believe it was three – that went straight to full construction without ever before appearing on a capital plan.

Through the chair, can the minister please explain how some schools can zoom straight from preplanning to full construction and other schools can have received design funding in 2023 or even 2022 but fail to show up on the capital plans for this year?

The Chair: Thank you, Member.

Mr. Nicolaides: Sure. Thank you. A very simple, straightforward answer: we have a gated process, of course, that we use to evaluate and score all of the projects. It's not necessarily an automatic transition. If you're in preplanning, it doesn't automatically mean you're going to go to planning or design or construction. Every project needs to be scored and evaluated every year based on enrolment needs and demands, utilization rates, pressures, safety considerations. Of course, if there's an older school that has some challenges with its infrastructure or other safety considerations, that would move that project forward faster, obviously, given safety considerations. So there is a gated evaluation and analysis that occurs to provide final scoring over individual projects.

8:20

With respect to the gated process that you mentioned, the move to the various stages of planning, design, and full construction, as you mentioned, was in part due to responses from and suggestions from the Auditor General, who requested and noted that there should be a higher degree of transparency over funding that is provided to school projects. By incorporating some of the Auditor General's recommendations and considerations, we developed the different stages to provide more transparency as to where dollars were going and how they were being used, whether they were being used for design purposes, drawings, or whether they were to be used for full construction funding.

I've had numerous conversations with our school boards and school authorities over the years – over the last few months, I should say – and I've heard largely very positive comments about the move to this approach. Of course, I don't want to speak here on behalf of all of our school boards – there's always a variety of views – but broadly, when I'm at different engagements, be it at the Alberta School Boards Association or the Rural Education Symposium or other events, I do hear comments of school boards speaking favourably to the new process, of which they've stated that it helps to provide them greater clarity about where projects are at, the likelihood of them moving forward, and how we can accelerate.

Of course, as I noted in my opening remarks, we have advanced 43 projects in this budget cycle. Nineteen of those projects are in full construction phase. That's the highest number of projects that have moved to full construction in seven years. We're really proud of that development so that we can build the schools that our growing province needs. We estimate to be able to create approximately 35,000 spaces with our aggressive capital plan to help meet the needs of Albertans and their children and their families.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Ms Chapman: Thank you. I mean, I've had some different conversations, I guess, but that maybe just comes with the territory, government or opposition, right? I've definitely been hearing some complaints from a few different school boards who maybe have felt that the process is not as transparent as they'd like it to be, maybe a bit difficult for them to track.

This one isn't coming from a complaint – don't get me wrong – but I just want to reference a specific capital request because this is an example of a school project that had received design funding back in 2022. Northern Gateway school division has a K to 12 school, a replacement school, that made the design list in 2022. This is an example of a school division that's really kind of throwing good money after bad. Right now they are maintaining three kind of seriously underutilized schools, very costly to maintain and operate, and they have been looking for a replacement school for some time now. If the school received its design funding in 2022, which it did, when can that school division expect to proceed to the full construction funding stage?

Mr. Nicolaides: Sure. Yeah. As I mentioned, there's no automatic transition from one stage to the next, of course, and some projects need more time in design than other projects. I'm not sure of the current stage of that project, whether the design work has been completed or not. I can ask my officials to take a closer look at that individual project and get back to you in a little bit more detail in a few moments.

As you can imagine, some projects may take a little bit more time in design than others, and that needs to be carefully evaluated. But, of course, as I mentioned earlier, all projects are evaluated based on a variety of needs, including safety, obviously – that's a top consideration for the ministry in making decisions about which schools to build, replace – and, in addition, as we mentioned, utilization rates and demand. Of course, if there are higher needs in certain areas of the province for new schools and for growing communities and the construction of new schools will ease utilization pressures in neighbouring schools, that also is a key priority that is weighed in.

I think that you mentioned the school division, but was the school that you were referring to the Valley View school project specifically?

Ms Chapman: Give me two ticks.

Mr. Nicolaides: Sure. No worries. I can filibuster a bit, and you can come back to it when you've had it.

Ms Chapman: Valley View. You're right.

Mr. Nicolaides: It is Valley View? Okay. Yeah, that one is moving forward, and there have been some serious considerations and conversations around the scope of the project. It's changed quite a bit from when they first received design funding. Of course, changing the scope puts other considerations into play and can sometimes delay things. They are working closely with the municipality as well. They're looking for some partnership opportunities, because, of course, I think, as we understand, oftentimes in constructing schools in some of our smaller communities like Valley View – it's not just a school. Oftentimes it's a place of greater enhancement for the community, space for the community to use. It can often be important for the community to be involved in decisions with respect to those school projects, and there has been some scope change there that has slowed things down for that particular project.

Ms Chapman: Yeah. I think that one just stuck out to me because that feels like a place where we would be looking for efficiencies in funding – right? – rather than maintaining these old, crumbling schools.

Still on the capital plan, while there were some schools like Northern Gateway that received that design funding and haven't yet moved forward, there are also schools that haven't previously appeared on any capital plans that are now receiving construction funding. Through the chair, I'd like to ask the minister about schools in Airdrie. Airdrie is experiencing enormous growth, for sure, like all of our metro areas, and in fact all three of Airdrie's public high schools are over 100 per cent utilization. One of them this year is at, I believe, 136 per cent.

In the 2023 capital plan a new Airdrie high school was approved in the planning category, but come 2024, we don't see a new high school for Airdrie. Instead, we see two K to 8 schools. I am receptive to what the minister has said about how projects go through this gated process, but it's very clear that there is really urgent need for a new public high school in Airdrie.

So there is full construction of two schools. They're both K to 8. Now, the K to 8 in South Windsong was the number one priority on the Rocky View school capital priorities and is site ready to go. That one makes a lot of sense to me. The K to 8 in Bayview: that one is actually listed as the fifth priority, though, for the board, and it does not yet even have site readiness. I'm just hoping the minister can explain how the decision was made to leapfrog over other projects already in the pipeline to approve that K to 8 in Bayview.

Mr. Nicolaides: Sure. Again, as I mentioned, Madam Chair, all projects are evaluated based on criteria. Those include safety, as I mentioned. But in this case, of course, we're talking a little bit more about utilization rates, and we're talking a little bit more about enrolment pressures and needs. As the member mentioned, two elementary schools received full construction funding for Airdrie, for Rocky View school division, so those projects can move forward.

In addition, with respect to high school space, yes, there is a need and demand for high school space. We have moved a project for a new high school forward. That project is now receiving design funding. Should Budget '24 be approved, it will receive design funding so that they can begin to design a new high school. Once that design work is completed, then, of course, it would be an eligible candidate to receive full construction funding.

As well, we've talked a little bit about, you know, moving through the pipeline. Again, not all projects are created equal. It's a lot easier and straightforward to design an elementary school. There's not really much that you really change. The size is usually fairly consistent. The rooms are usually fairly consistent. The only challenges that you might have would be due to layout of the site or things of that nature.

8:30

Of course, when you get to a high school, designing is much more complicated. Many more students in a high school setting and oftentimes more dynamic programs. There can be a culinary program. There can be automotive programming. There can be greater need or desire to focus on athletic programming. So that can dramatically change the design scope of a high school. Oftentimes those projects take a little bit longer. That's why it was important for us to move an Airdrie high school project up as quickly as possible into design so that the design work can begin as expeditiously as possible, because, of course, once that work is done, then that project would be an eligible candidate for full funding so that we can move forward on full construction funding.

As the member mentioned, indeed Airdrie and many of our other communities are seeing significant enrolment growth and population growth. It's welcome to see thousands and thousands and thousands of people choosing to call Alberta home, choosing to move to our incredible province, recognizing the tremendous benefits that they receive, of course, through economic opportunity, a strong education system, strong health care. That's evident by the fact that we are one of the fastest if not the fastest growing jurisdiction in the entire country. Airdrie is one of the fastest growing cities in the entire country.

We're happy to see that our work over the past five years to restart the economy, attract people from around the world and across the country is working, and we're working expeditiously to build schools to make sure that their families, of course, have access to a world-class education system that they expect and deserve.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Ms Chapman: Thank you. Yes. I certainly appreciate that, you know, the thousands of people that are moving here. It brings really specific urgency, I think, to our education infrastructure, and I'm still not convinced that we're seeing this government respond to that urgency appropriately.

You know, what's happening in Airdrie isn't something that happened just this past year, of course; this is a problem that has been growing over the years. When you chronically underfund your capital plans over the years, this is where you end up – right? – with all your high schools over 100 per cent. A high school design: as you say, the design is more complicated, of course, for a high school. You know, we know that you can build an elementary in maybe 18 to 24 months, but for a high school we're looking at three to five years before Airdrie is going to have anything to ease the pressure in their high schools.

Just to switch over to Calgary, which is a city that, like Airdrie, is absolutely booming, with that growing population, we have seen a corresponding growth in our schools. In fact, some of our school systems have seen growth in student populations even higher than general population growth, and CBE is one of those systems. They have seen a 5.7 per cent increase. As I mentioned earlier, of the 20,000 new students who have enrolled in schools across the province, 7,000, so a quarter of those students, are enrolled with the CBE. CBE system overall utilization is at 93 per cent. High schools in the system are over 100 per cent utilization, yet Budget 2024 only adds 600 spaces for the CBE.

As I just mentioned, it takes a while to build schools: elementary schools anywhere from 18 to 24 months, that high school up to three years. Then there are the delays to move through the process, to move through your four steps – your preplanning, planning, design, construction – so anywhere from three to five years to get a new high school built. Given that it does take anywhere from three to five years to build, when can the CBE expect to get funds to get shovels in the ground, construction funding to build the new high schools that Calgary public desperately needs?

Mr. Nicolaides: Sure. As soon as all of the preliminary work is done, we'll be able to move forward on full construction funding. In the current budget we have approved to move forward the CBE's top five projects. That includes full construction funding for a new K to 4 school in Evanston. They also moved from planning to design for a new high school in Cornerstone. They also moved straight to design for a new K to 4 school in Redstone. They also moved up a new 5 to 9 school in Saddle Ridge, moved to planning, and a modernization of another school moved up to design. These

were their top five projects that, of course, were provided and communicated to us.

As, of course, is the case, every spring our school divisions put forward their capital priority lists, and government takes their direction through their capital priority lists to explore and evaluate which projects are of top priority to them. We use that information to inform and determine our budget considerations and allocations. We have looked very carefully at the projects that our school divisions have put on their top-priority list, and we have worked to provide funding for as many of those projects as possible, as I mentioned. Specifically with respect to the CBE, we've provided funding to advance their top five priority projects.

In total, in the Calgary metropolitan area there with the projects – because, of course, the CBE is one provider. There's also, of course, the Calgary Catholic school division, that also has projects in the city, and Rocky View schools, that also has projects in the metropolitan area in Cochrane, in Chestermere, and in Airdrie. Of course, as is the case, we're seeing significant growth not just limited to the Calgarys and Edmontons but also to the surrounding communities. Collectively the Calgary area will see 18 new schools move forward, which will add capacity for over 16,500 additional students in the coming years once all of those projects are completed.

Ms Chapman: Okay. Thank you. Yeah. I do, again, appreciate that focus on the Calgary metro, but it is really CBE – and we do know that growth is happening across the metros, Calgary and Edmonton. But I would just like to point again to how much of that enrolment growth the CBE is carrying; 25 per cent of the enrolment growth across the province is happening within one single board.

Again, you know, if you're like me and go back and read past years of estimates, you can see a trend that has happened over the years. CBE had been raising flags about this for a number of years, and growing utilization rates, honestly, had just been kind of brushed off in the past even though we see them ticking up year over year, right? They're at 80 per cent, then they're at 85, and then they're at 89.

I mean, of course, the best time to do something about this was many years ago, but the second-best time is now. CBE has said that even if the government funded all of the capital projects on their entire three-year plan, not just the capital projects listed for this year, they will still run out of space within the next five years. So there is a real crisis happening in the Calgary public system if CBE schools are over capacity in a few years because of this government's lack of action now to build enough spaces for the projected number of students. To be clear, the projections for the coming years look very similar to this year, so anticipating a lot of growth in our public systems. If the government is not acting now, which they aren't, to build enough spaces for that projected number of students, what contingency plans are in place to make sure that these students have a desk in a classroom in a school?

8:40

Mr. Nicolaides: Sure. I think it's important again to recognize the significant pressure that our school divisions are facing. The government recognizes the pressure that our school divisions are facing. We are seeing some very significant enrolment trends. As an example, for the 2020 to '21 year the CBE particularly – I know we've been focusing a little bit on the CBE – saw no increase in their overall level of students. In the '21-22 year they saw an increase of 2.4 per cent, which is in line with moderate and typical growth. However, in the '22-23 year they saw a 5 per cent increase and in the '23-24 year, similarly, a 4.7 per cent increase.

We are seeing a sudden and dramatic increase. Of course, population increases have cascading impacts not just in education but in health care and in other areas. A lot of the dramatic increases that we're seeing are, of course, folks moving from other provinces, net interprovincial migration, and, more significantly, immigration. That seems to be driving our population increase in the province during these past couple of years.

This increase has been quite significant, quite sudden, and we're working as expeditiously as we can. We'll have more to say very shortly with respect to modulars, which are quick solutions, faster solutions rather than building new schools, to be able to accommodate and relieve pressure in some of those high-pressure points. The government is making significant investments in modulars to help alleviate some of that immediate pressure. But, of course, we're also moving to move capital projects forward so that we can get new schools designed and built as quickly as possible. That's why this budget projects 19 projects across the province for full construction funding – as I mentioned, that's the highest level in seven years – so that we can help to accommodate this growth.

You mentioned CBE as well, but we can't just look at one school division in isolation. As I mentioned earlier, there are multiple providers often in a single metropolitan area or even within the city. We talked a little bit about high school space. A new high school was as well approved for full construction funding for Calgary Catholic in Rangeview. That is an important new development for high school space.

Of course, it is important that all of the different projects are looked at together. Oftentimes, you know, parents will look at the available options that they have in their community, and there can be a little bit of a transient nature sometimes between the two school divisions. Just take my community as an example: I know so many parents and families in my community that are enrolled in the Calgary Catholic school division that elect to send their children for high school to the CBE high school because it's a lot closer than the designated Catholic high school for that community. There can be interplay oftentimes between the two school divisions. So we do look at the need.

There is a desire and need for new high school projects, and that's specifically why we approved a new high school in Rangeview, and we have provided design funding for another new high school in Cornerstone as well.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Ms Chapman: Thank you. Yeah; I do know that Calgary Catholic is quite happy about that high school funding, of course, because their high schools are at 100 per cent utilization already. But it is important that, you know, we offer parents that choice in education, right? Many parents, in fact the majority of parents in Calgary, choose the CBE as their school provider. So I'm not convinced that it's, you know, fair to say: well, we built a Catholic high school or a private high school or whatever that looks like. To say that that then covers the need that exists within our public system: it does not; it's something very different.

I just wanted to go back because there was a comment about how immigration is driving population growth. Certainly, I know that. Certainly, I see that in my own community of Calgary-Beddington, and I see that in the school that my children attend, that a lot of the new families we have joining us are families not just new to our community but who are new to Canada. It's wonderful to welcome them into our schools, but it also comes with a greater need. We definitely have seen maybe a little bit of a lack of support on English language learning. It's just part of that piece of classroom complexity.

I just want to know how the government is ensuring that students' educations will not be hindered by capacity issues. From where I sit and from what I hear, it does seem that classroom complexity and increasingly worse outcomes for students are a natural consequence of chronic underfunding and underbuilding of schools. So I'd just like to hear from the minister, through the chair, a bit on how they're ensuring that our students' educations are not being hindered by capacity issues in our schools.

Mr. Nicolaidis: Sure. Well, just to jump back to capital quickly, you know, the statement was made that there's chronic underfunding of school projects. Budget '24 provides a road map to invest \$2.1 billion over the next three years in school capital priorities and projects. That's not small change; that's a significant investment. We want to be able to move forward as quickly as we can. Of course, there are always logistical challenges. You know, even if we approved every single project of every single school division, the reality is that we probably wouldn't be able to build them all. There are labour force challenges, not just in our province but across the entire country. It's challenging to recruit skilled trades professionals. It's challenging to recruit other individuals and professionals who would be required in construction of new projects, including schools.

We have to also think about and work with the Ministry of Infrastructure to ensure that we have capacity to actually build the projects that are desired and needed. I've talked about this as well with some of our school boards, and I think they recognize the challenges. You know, it's challenging across the country to recruit teachers. It's challenging across the country to recruit bus drivers. It's challenging across the country to recruit skilled trades professionals, be they trades workers or others. We, like many other provinces and, I would argue, many other countries, are experiencing challenges when it comes to labour force supply.

Coming back to classroom complexity, there is no question that we are seeing increased complexity in our classroom in addition to, as you mentioned, seeing an increased number of students who speak English as an additional language. To help accommodate that, we've taken a number of steps. First and foremost, in Budget '23 we provided a three-year investment of \$126 million over three years specifically for the development of a new classroom complexity grant. That grant will be providing approximately \$44 million in funding this year alone to our school boards. That funding is to be used specifically to help our school boards navigate and deal with issues related to classroom complexity. Oftentimes that goes into hiring additional educational assistants, psychologists, speech-language pathologists, occupational therapists, and others that are needed to help support students if they are lagging behind in their academic ability, in their writing ability, require some specialized psychological services or treatments.

8:50

That is an initiative of the government that the government of Alberta undertook through Budget '23 to provide targeted and specific funding for school divisions to help address classroom complexity. Of course, there's no single silver bullet. Multiple partners need to be involved and engaged to help navigate through the challenges, and of course access to funding helps our school divisions provide additional resources, so we're making that available but also working with our partners, be it the Alberta Teachers' Association or other school boards, to find other measures and other approaches that we can take.

As an example, I just met yesterday with the Alberta Teachers' Association on the topic of violence in schools. Oftentimes, of course, some students that may have behavioural challenges or

other issues may and can resort to violence against other students or other teachers, and of course that makes the classroom dynamic quite challenging and complex. We talked about the fact that currently there's no requirement for teachers to undergo any specialized training or education in de-escalation to help navigate these. From their analysis and report a lot of teachers feel as though they may not have all of the tools that they need in terms of skills to deal sometimes with situations that could get a little bit out of control. So we're working with the Alberta Teachers' Association and other partners to see how we can help bolster training, professional development, and other opportunities to help teachers develop the skills that they need to deal with some of those dynamics in the classroom.

I apologize for the long-winded answer, but I guess I'm just trying to provide a picture here that, of course, classroom complexity is, you know, complex; no pun intended. That requires a comprehensive solution both through funding to be able to hire additional staff and provide additional supports – and that's precisely what we're doing – and working with other partners.

Overall, Budget '24 does include funding of \$1.5 billion in total funding specifically for learner support funding. Learner support includes everything from English as an additional language – I mentioned some of the grants earlier in my opening remarks, but just as a highlight that includes program unit funding, PUF; English as an additional language, as you noted; the refugee student grant; the First Nations, Métis, and Inuit grant; the school nutrition grant; and a whole host of other grants that are specifically provided to help address some of those more nuanced and challenging issues.

Ms Chapman: Thank you, Minister. Yeah. The violence in schools. That's something that has gotten so big, I actually hear about it in my constituency office. I'm sure you know that not every issue trickles down that far, to a constituency e-mail.

The ministry had made this change in 2023 to move to this process of school funding to be announced in four stages. I'm just going back to this because I feel that there can be a bit of a disingenuous way to present the number of school projects. I saw a tweet this morning of the comparison between this government and the previous previous government, not the last term but the term before that. Of course, it's not an apples-to-apples comparison because we have added in all those extra stages, right? So adding in those extra stages – preplanning, planning – was a great idea so that a government could inflate the number of capital projects that had been approved.

For example, in 2022 there were 15 school projects approved – that was back before we had this gated process – but then in 2023 all of a sudden the number goes up to 58. The real number that matters, I think, is construction, so I went back and looked at school construction, and interestingly the number of school build projects in any given year hasn't changed over the last five years of this government. On average, 12 schools are approved for construction funding each year. Of course, not all of these are new school builds. Sometimes funding is approved for a replacement school solution or modernization or repairs. If we look at the actual numbers over the last five years, this government has only approved funding to build 30 new schools, modernize 14, and replace 19. At a time of astronomical growth now we're only seeing the funding to build 11 new schools.

Oh, wait; I might be off on that. I was happy to see yesterday that we finally got clarity on what rural schools would be funded as well. When the capital plan initially was announced, there were only schools announced there in the metro area. I can't say that I was pleased with the government's decision to avoid accountability to the lack of rural schools present in this year's capital plan by simply

holding off the announcement until the stories about school capital had already been written. Despite the rather odd rollout I am glad seven rural schools are going to be built.

I do have questions about areas like Taber, Wainwright, Mallaig, Coalhurst, Donnelly, Stettler, Barrhead. These were all areas that were promised schools last budget, either in preplanning, planning, or design, that are not listed in this year's capital plan. I do worry about those communities. Why were they promised schools last year right before an election but are now being left in the dust? I would imagine that if they needed a school in 2023, they need one now. What's behind the decision to cut so many school projects that were promised last year from this year?

Mr. Nicolaidis: Yeah. Thank you. Again, all projects are evaluated and scored every year. Of course, one of those variables includes, as I've mentioned, population and enrolment. As I highlighted earlier, we're seeing some significant enrolment pressures in our major metro regions, so many of those projects in our metro communities would score a lot higher given a lot of the enrolment pressures and utilization rate pressures that we've spoken a little bit about and that you yourself have mentioned.

Just coming back to the various stages of capital planning, again, this was something that was developed in light of some Auditor General comments and recommendations, which included providing a higher degree of transparency over how funds were being provided. The process in the past was a little more complicated in the sense that – one of the school board chairs called it Christmas in spring because they would wait, of course, until the budget was released and then see. Then it would be Christmas as they would see which projects would be awarded.

That can create challenges. If a government simply decides and picks a particular project to be fully funded, a school board may not quite be ready. The site may not be ready. The design may not have been completed. This links back into why the Auditor General made some of the recommendations that they did. If you just provide the full bucket of money to fund a particular project but the site is not quite ready, the planning hasn't been done, the design work hasn't been done, then you're carrying over funds year over year, and that creates transparency issues and accountability issues over the funds, where they're going, how they're being allocated.

Again, that's the genesis of some of the Auditor General's recommendations, which I think are quite logical. We've taken that feedback because we believe it's incredibly important to be very transparent, as transparent as possible with taxpayer funds and how they're being used and where they're going. So we incorporated those changes. As well, we had received feedback in previous years of requests for more clarity from our school boards. They were not happy with being surprised at Christmastime in the spring and finding out from one day to the next which projects would be moving ahead. They preferred an approach whereby they knew which projects were in the pipeline, which projects were of priority, and which projects were moving up, because, of course, it helps them plan. We did receive requests from some of our partners to incorporate those elements.

9:00

The planning approach. Just so that we can talk a little bit more about that particular phase, when we talk about planning – and then after planning is design and then full construction. The planning allows for more efficient project delivery. It helps to support the elimination of nonviable options before a full funding commitment is made. It helps to support the development of partnerships. We talked earlier about Valley View and many other projects in our smaller communities. Oftentimes there are partnerships involved

with the community over space and use of space. It helps to ensure alignment with the government's capital planning strategy and, again, just helps to provide a greater degree of transparency.

Ultimately, the goal is to remove barriers and better position projects for consideration of future stages and help the school boards have greater clarity about which projects are moving forward, what kind of work they should be undertaking for those individual projects. Again, there are always tweaks, I'm sure. You know, not everyone is going to be happy with everything, but broadly, when I speak to our school boards, I do hear positive commentary with the new planning process for capital projects.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Ms Chapman: I have a super quick one, because I didn't see preplanning. Have we dropped that as a category, or were there just no schools funded under preplanning this year?

Mr. Nicolaides: There are still projects in preplanning, in the preplanning phase. In total, there are 98 projects in the queue, be it in preplanning, planning, design, or full construction. Budget '24 moves 43 of those projects up a stage in some manner, be it from planning to design or design to construction.

Ms Chapman: But did we add any new preplanning this year?

Mr. Nicolaides: No new projects were added into preplanning, but there are still projects in preplanning.

Ms Chapman: Gotcha. So that stage still exists, and we might have . . .

Mr. Nicolaides: Correct.

Ms Chapman: Thank you.

Okay. One more question – well, a bit of a preamble and then a question – on the capital plan. As I've said, you know, the only number that really counts when we're counting school projects is construction funding. Over five years this government has approved funds to build 63 school projects; that's 30 new schools, 19 replacements, and 14 modernizations. The low number of modernization projects really stood out to me, probably partly because I live in an established community with schools that were built, oh, gosh, 50 years ago now, I guess.

Here are a couple of examples of what modernization can look like in a school. Crystal Park school is a school in Grande Prairie. The school is 39 years old, and, like many schools across the province, it has never been modernized. For them, it's the mechanical systems; they're reaching end of life, you know. It's not fun, it's not glamorous, but it's very necessary for the life cycle of a school building.

Huntington Hills elementary: that's a CBE school. It's in my community. It was a 1960s build. This might be hard to believe, but it is an open concept school. I don't know if kids were different in the '60s than they are now, but it's certainly a very challenging environment to learn and teach in. There are no doors into classrooms here. You've got wings that come off a central hub, four classrooms in a wing, and no doors to seal those classrooms off from each other, only partial walls. I don't know if you can imagine learning or teaching in a space that holds four separate classrooms with no way to contain sound between those classrooms.

Then we have schools like St. Martin De Porres. This was a modernization success project, I guess you could say, meaning it actually was one of the 14 schools to get funding to be modernized. But, gosh, it took a heck of a long time, so two years from approval

to start of construction on modernization, and it languished for 17 years on the capital plan before that. Twenty-five per cent of schools in Edmonton Catholic are rated in poor condition. The fact is simply that our schools are aging, and it needs addressing. Modernization of our older schools is just as needed as new school builds.

Safe, accessible schools for students in mature neighbourhoods is an issue. My colleague from Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood has been advocating for a replacement school for Delton school since she was elected in 2019. Delton is a school that serves inner-city communities and many low-income families. Delton has been a priority school for modernization and replacement for 15 years. Those families have been waiting for so long for a new school to replace theirs that it's just bursting at the seams. The library has been cut in half. The daycare has been displaced to make classroom space for kids. It's old. It's inaccessible. It has experienced flooding and rodent issues. On the coldest days this winter they had multiple spaces with no heat. So Delton school needs to be replaced.

What assurances can those families have that a new Delton school will actually be built and not just continue to be on the planning list? More broadly, what is this government's plan to support aging infrastructure in this province?

Mr. Nicolaides: Sure. Just with respect to the Delton project, yeah, it's needed and, as you mentioned, has been on the capital list for a while. That's why our government has moved it into planning, so that we can start planning the project and we can move it forward. It's needed. It's been required for many years, as you mentioned. In Budget '24, if passed, we will be providing planning funding for that project in, as you mentioned, Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood. I'll look for the member's support for the budget in the Legislature so that we can provide planning dollars for that project and move it forward for the incredible residents of the community.

Indeed, as the member mentioned, we do of course have some aging infrastructure in our province, and this is part of the challenges as well. You know, as we mentioned, there's always a limited amount of funds available with respect to school construction, modernization, and other projects. We firmly believe as a government that it's critical that we are fiscally prudent, that we're delivering a balanced budget and being prudent with taxpayer dollars.

There are needs to provide modernization projects and fund modernization projects, and of course there are needs, as we've been talking about throughout the course of this morning, to build new schools in growing communities, and as we mentioned already, there are also limitations with respect to the available workforce, being able to build all the projects. Again, I could approve all the projects tomorrow. The ability to actually build them and hire the appropriate professionals that are needed to build all of these projects, be they modernizations or new schools, would be limited. We wouldn't be able to build them all. That's why the staged process is so important, so that we can work through those different stages, get all the preliminary work done in a planning stage, rule out nonviable options, begin partnership conversations with community. Then, once a project's scope has been identified, we can provide design funding to begin actually designing the school, and once all that's done, then we can start actually putting shovels in the ground and building the school.

Coming back to aging infrastructure, as I mentioned, yes, certainly that's something that is of significant consideration, and that's precisely why we have increased the funding available for capital maintenance and renewal by \$67 million in Budget '24. That funding is provided to our school boards to enable them to make

infrastructure upgrades, maintenance repairs, and other things that are needed with aging infrastructure.

9:10

We recognize and fully agree that there are projects that require additional investments in maintenance and renewal, and that's precisely why we've increased funding by \$67 million for this year alone and are looking in Budget '24 to provide a total investment of \$381 million over the next three years. Again, I look for the member's support for the upcoming budget so that we can float those dollars out to our school board so that they can then begin that important maintenance and renewal work.

In addition, Budget '24 does include five modernization projects across the province. Of course, through the scoring and analysis that the ministry does every year with school projects and capital priorities, the need to build new schools in growing communities, of course, is at the top of the priority list, but modernizing projects and providing for those upgrades for aging infrastructure is also equally important. That's part of the reason why five projects are being modernized and updated and why we've increased our investment to capital maintenance and renewal by \$67 million for this year alone.

Ms Chapman: Thank you.

Yeah. On the modernization, though, too, it's just one that's actually going to be modernized this year; the other four are just planning to modernize in future years. Certainly, I do appreciate the need to balance between building, modernizing. I do appreciate that, you know, we can't necessarily build a hundred new schools. Of course, there are limitations on resources, which is why it would be better to not leave it for so many years to get to this point. We simply should have been building more schools over a number of the last five years, and then we wouldn't have been in this crisis situation that we find ourselves in right now.

Okay. I'm going to shift. I think I have time. I've just got a couple of questions on the funding model. I believe that the minister was asked a question about the weighted moving average in a recent press conference, and I believe this is something the minister will of course have heard about from stakeholder groups. This funding formula does use a heavy weighting for projected students; 50 per cent of funding is matched to actual student numbers, but the other half is determined based on student projections. This is certainly an interesting choice for this government. I have noted over the years that they have often been critical about the accuracy of student projections.

What we do know now that it's been in place is that this is a formula that is working very well for many of our rural school boards, boards where student populations are stable or declining, but in our growing areas – our big cities, our metros, and, frankly, even some of our small municipalities – where we have had this huge growth in student population, the weighted moving average isn't working very well.

I do know that the government loves the opportunity to do those extra goodies announcements, so when we're choosing to underfund our metro boards, that does allow for the opportunity for the government to swoop in and, you know, throw a few extra dollars at growing enrolment. But, really, it seems to me and, I think, it probably certainly seems to metro boards that we could avoid all this funding uncertainty with a change to that funding model.

Just to give one example to highlight how the weighted moving average can punish some boards, this school year Calgary Catholic was funded for enrolment at 58,794 students. Actual enrolment is 61,584. Through the chair, would the minister care to explain why

2,790 students don't deserve the same level of funding that the first 58,794 got?

Mr. Nicolaides: Sure. Thank you, Chair. Well, of course, all students receive funding, as the member mentioned. Funding is provided to our school boards through a three-year weighted moving average: 50 per cent is provided in the first year, 30 per cent in second year, and 20 per cent in the third year. We fund the enrolment levels that our school divisions provide to us and communicate to us in Budget '24.

Through the collective estimates of our school boards we're projecting to see 33,000 additional students in our K to 12 system, and we have increased education funding by almost \$400 million. That's to provide funding to 333,000 students. All students will receive funding that they need and require through the three-year weighted moving average to be able to ensure that they have the resources that they need. For growing school divisions we also have, which I'm sure I'll talk about in a few more moments, the supplemental enrolment growth grant that provides extra funding for growing boards.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Minister. This concludes the first portion of our questions for the Official Opposition.

Just to mention here, we'll take our break at 9:40.

We're going to move now over to the government caucus. If you would kindly direct your conversation through the chair, that would be most appreciated. Thank you. Please proceed.

Mr. Long: Thank you, Chair.

The Chair: Are we going to back and forth, then? What's your preference, Member?

Mr. Long: I'd like to go back and forth if that's okay.

Mr. Nicolaides: I think we might be able to do that. Yeah.

The Chair: Please proceed.

Mr. Long: Thank you, Chair, and through you, thank you to the minister and your team, your staff. I do want to share, first and foremost, that I joined the minister at the Rural Education Symposium recently and, in seeing the way that the minister handled that and hearing from numerous folks around the room, not only was it greatly appreciated that he took the time to speak; the minister stayed and actually did a Q and A with a moderator on his own for just over an hour. Many folks in the room commented that that's been unheard of. There were folks there from other provinces who said that they would never get that from their ministers of education, that their ministers would literally just show up, speak, and leave. Being willing to engage with people first-hand and answer questions alone shows just the remarkable minister that you are, so thank you for that.

I appreciated a lot of the questions, actually, that the member of the opposition was asking. I especially appreciated their interest in rural Alberta. That's been a major priority for me these last few years in different capacities as an MLA for a rural constituency; also in my time as parliamentary secretary for small business and tourism, the impact that business operators have in our rural communities; and now as parl sec for rural health. So it's great to see the opposition also paying attention to rural Alberta because, quite frankly, I believe personally that that's the backbone of our province.

With that, Minister, I appreciate your focus on rural Alberta as well. I actually appreciated your insight in particular on the Valley

View project. Northern Gateway is one of the many school boards that I represent. I'm very aware of the project and why there are some delays there, so I appreciate you addressing that and how that particular project also requires the school board to work out deals with the municipality to find efficiencies. They're obviously very aware of that project and what's going on and stuff, but maybe the public might not be as aware. Again, I appreciated the member of the opposition bringing it up and your way of addressing it, so thank you for that.

You know, Minister, that said, as we all know here, Alberta is experiencing a near record level of population growth in large part due to the fact that we have created the land of opportunity once again. Strong economic policies, you know, a prudent outlook on both now and the future by our government have been attracting people not just from around the country but around the globe to move here, call this place home, and seek out a better future for their families. Part of that better future is actually – no pressure – in the role that you provide to this government and to the province, you know, on the education front and providing a good education with the proper learning space for students.

9:20

Along with this significant growth comes significant enrolment pressures in our schools, especially in metro and suburban areas. I know you take this seriously, and you've created a supplemental enrolment growth grant that provides additional funding to these school divisions most impacted. I note that in key objective 4.1, page 39 of the Alberta Education 2024 business plan, it requires the ministry to "work with school authorities on recruitment and retention strategies for teachers and other school staff in underserved areas." How is Alberta's Education budget keeping up to its record population growth?

And if I can just follow up on a couple of other points on this, how much is Budget 2024 investing to specifically address enrolment growth by hiring additional teachers and classroom support staff? And then: how many teachers and educational assistants and support staff will be hired through that investment?

Mr. Nicolaides: Sure. Thank you for the question. Yeah. You're bang on. You know, we've been, I think, as a government working, as you know, for the past few years to restart the Alberta economy, to make Alberta a place of opportunity once again. That's the Alberta I was born into. That's the Alberta I was raised into and that I always knew as a place where hard-working people could come and get ahead and create a better opportunity for themselves. Actually, one of the reasons why I decided to get involved in politics is because I saw that that dream was slipping away for too many people. I think it was for the first time ever or for the first time in decades several years ago that Alberta had negative net interprovincial migration. More people were leaving the province than coming in, which hadn't occurred in years and years and years if not ever. So that was really concerning.

As you know, of course, government has put together a very aggressive strategy to restart our economy and make Alberta an attractive place again, and many of the signs would suggest that those efforts are working and are delivering, as we see not just more and more people choosing to come to Alberta, but we also see new investment coming to our province.

Previously as Minister of Advanced Education we worked with WestJet to sign a memorandum of understanding with them to base their entire 787 Dreamliner fleet here in Calgary, in Alberta. There was also a significant investment from De Havilland to move their aircraft manufacturing centre to Wheatland county. There were others. Amazon Web Services made a significant investment and

other major players. I think they really heard the message and saw, more importantly, the conducive investment climate that we were working to create. We know that if we can make Alberta a really attractive investment jurisdiction, companies will look to Alberta, will choose Alberta, and that will strengthen our economic output and activity. We need that to be able to do all of these things, to be able to build more schools, to be able to provide specialized and targeted funding to students with complex needs, to divergent children and other very unique needs.

It's important that we continue to see strong growth both economically and in terms of population. Of course, that does create challenges. We're all acutely aware of that. It does create pressure, and the government is responding to that pressure. In November of last year I announced a \$30 million top-up to the supplemental enrolment growth grant. This grant is a grant that's available for school divisions who are experiencing enrolment above and beyond what they forecasted. Sometimes it's difficult to make accurate forecasts and, especially with the trends that we're seeing, the forecasts are way off. Just because the population increase is so sudden and so significant, their forecasts are way off and they're taking in way more students than they expected, so we are there to support them.

That's why the supplemental enrolment growth grant was created. It's why we topped it up with \$30 million in additional funding in-year in November, and it's also why we changed some of the parameters of the supplemental enrolment growth grant. Previously you had to experience growth above I believe it was 2 per cent. Jeff can kick me under the table if I'm wrong. He's nodding his head, so I think we're okay. The funding would only kick in if you had growth above 2 per cent, but in November, when we provided the additional funding, we also changed the parameters so that if you had any growth of just one student, you would receive additional funding. We recognize that the pressure is sudden, the pressure is significant, so we want to make sure that government is responding and reacting accordingly.

In terms of just coming back to your question, though – I apologize for the long-windedness – about enrolment, over the next three years Budget '24 provides a road map to invest \$1.2 billion in new funding specifically for enrolment growth. It's a significant investment to our school boards and school jurisdictions. We estimate that that will help of course hire additional bus drivers, additional educational assistants, and broadly we estimate it'll help support the hiring of over 3,000 additional educational staff. We had provided funding in Budget '23 as well to help our school boards hire more educational assistants and staff, and we're seeing those efforts begin to pay off.

This year alone our school boards hired over 1,000 additional teachers into our classrooms, so the funding that we've provided, both in Budget '23 and are continuing to provide, is working, is going to intended goals and outcomes. That \$1.2 billion, as I mentioned, is specifically for enrolment growth.

As a comprehensive picture the Ministry of Education's budget for this budget year will hit an all-time high of \$9.3 billion. That'll be the highest amount that the government has ever spent in Education. That represents, just in some more comparative terms, a 4.4 per cent increase from last budget, and in raw dollars that's \$393 million additional investment of new money from last budget to this budget.

Mr. Long: Thank you. Thank you, Minister, and no need to apologize for being long-winded. I have that habit myself on occasion.

You know, again, I appreciate that money going directly to classrooms. My wife is a teacher. My mom was a teacher for 30

something-odd years in elementary, and my sister is a teacher currently practising in South Korea, actually. So the fact that our government is prioritizing funding to get to the classroom: I know that's huge.

Another element I appreciated earlier was the history lesson that was provided by the member of the opposition. I'm well aware that teachers didn't get an increase for a number of years until we came into government after the 2019 election. That said, as I say, it's great to see that funding is being prioritized for teachers and for assistants and for bus drivers. You know, like you said, we did face a period . . .

The Chair: Member, could you please direct your conversation through the chair?

Mr. Long: Yes. Thank you, Chair. As the minister did allude, there was a point in our recent history of negative migration numbers in our province, but fortunately our population is growing at a pace that we haven't seen in decades. Many constituents and folks that I've talked to around the province have been suggesting that new schools are needed in growing communities.

9:30

I note that on page 108 of the government fiscal plan it states that "the 2024 Capital Plan allocates \$2.1 billion over three years, a \$466 million increase from Budget 2023, to building and modernizing schools, investing in the modular school program, and supporting expansion of specialized programs such as collegiate and public charter schools."

I was hoping the minister could please share with us how many schools are being built, including how many of those schools for Calgary and Edmonton, specifically. How many new student spaces are created through the 2024 capital plan? How many spaces of that number will be specific to Calgary and Edmonton?

Mr. Nicolaides: Sure. Thank you. Just on the spaces, the capital plan anticipates to build 35,000 additional spaces. The vast majority of those spaces, if memory serves me correct, north of 80 per cent, will be in the Calgary and Edmonton metropolitan areas because those are the areas where we have the highest level of growth. When I say metropolitan areas, of course, that includes surrounding communities. Again, that's an evidence-based approach, based on need, and I think that that's particularly important. We've heard it throughout the course of the morning, concerns over space needs in our largest metropolitan regions and cities, so that's where the vast majority of those spaces are going.

More specifically, 16,000 spaces will be created in the Calgary area, and over 12,000 more spaces will be created in the Edmonton area. I think I've mentioned before that with respect to particular projects we're looking at 14 projects at various stages – planning, design, and full construction – in total for the capital region and 18 in total for the Calgary region. Again, this is the final determination. As I've mentioned before, there's analysis and scoring that occurs with each individual school project, looking at need and demand and, as we've mentioned before, safety, modernization requirements but also space needs. We're seeing very clearly that need for additional spaces in our largest metropolitan areas, and that's where the majority of new spaces will be added.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Mr. Long: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, through you, to the minister. I think everyone here agrees that announcing new schools is key to addressing Alberta's growing population. Again, in history we know that announcing zero schools over successive years in

2015 and 2016 has actually likely put us behind the eight ball for moving forward from there. With that, having announcements and having the design, the planning funding that's needed and then, obviously, the building funding afterwards is key to moving forward and not getting behind that eight ball again.

That said, communities need short-term solutions to ease enrolment pressures such as through the modular classroom program I've seen throughout my riding. Outcome 4 in the Alberta Education business plan states, "Implement school capital strategies to increase the number of classrooms in areas of greatest need."

I know that Budget 2024 provides \$103 million over three years to address the urgent needs for additional student spaces across the province. Through the chair to the minister: I'm curious how many new modular classrooms will be procured in Budget 2024. How many modular classrooms will be relocated, and can you describe the process that determines how the modular classrooms will be allocated to address the greatest need?

Mr. Nicolaides: Sure. I'll try to do that in a minute, Chair. I won't get offended if you interrupt me. Budget '24 includes \$103 million over the next three years for modular classrooms. I'll just try to rattle off all these points in the minute that I have left, but I'm sure we'll come back to modulares at another point. Fifty million dollars will be going to procure 70 modular classrooms and assist with the relocation of 12 modular classrooms. The way it works is that every year school jurisdictions are asked to submit their request for modular classrooms to help ease enrolment pressures and address programming needs. Of course, those are evaluated and scored based on need and priority and then provided to our school jurisdictions as quickly as possible. Again, that's \$50 million that we'll be providing for the '24-25 fiscal year for 70 modular classrooms and the relocation of 12 additional modulares.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister. I didn't want to take your time, but that concludes our first round of the government members' block.

Let's take our five-minute break now, and we'll resume in just a few minutes. Thanks, everyone.

[The committee adjourned from 9:36 a.m. to 9:43 a.m.]

The Chair: Okay. Now we move to the second round of questions and responses. The speaker rotation going forward will be the same as in the first round, starting with the Official Opposition, followed by the government caucus. However, the speaking times are now reduced to five minutes for the duration of the consideration of this ministry's estimates. We'll now begin this rotation with the Official Opposition for your five minutes of questions and comments, followed by a response from the minister, who may speak for up to five minutes. After both individuals have had an opportunity to speak, we will then move on to the next caucus in rotation. If the member and minister agree to share time, then we'll proceed with 10-minute segments, during which neither the member nor the minister may speak for more than five minutes. Members are reminded that they may not cede an unused portion of their time to any other member.

Member and Minister, do you wish to share your time?

Mr. Nicolaides: Sure.

The Chair: Yes?

Mr. Nicolaides: Yeah.

The Chair: And you're going to be taking the questions from here?

Mr. Ellingson: Yes.

The Chair: I see by the nodding yes. Please proceed.

Mr. Ellingson: Thank you, Madam Chair. I'd like to take a few minutes, if I may, to ask questions about building schools in Calgary's rapidly growing suburban communities, especially the communities found in the constituency of Calgary-Foothills. Probably no shock to the minister that I'll ask these questions, but I will just, you know, take 10 seconds to say that, like, I was pretty excited to hear earlier a question about the schools in Valleyview. Some of you may already know that I grew up in Valleyview. I did go to the elementary school and junior high school, high school in Valleyview, so it's cool here in estimates to see that pop up.

Through the chair, the minister has mentioned his commitment to ensuring Alberta's students have access to the very best education in Canada, and I certainly commend the minister for that lofty goal. I think we all agree on that goal.

There is key objective 4.4, implementing school capital strategies to increase the number of classrooms in the area of greatest need. I just want to zero in, if I might, on the words "of greatest need." We have heard the minister mention already, too, a couple of times \$2.1 billion over three years for planning, designing, and building new schools. I do want to emphasize for my questions the words "new schools."

The minister has talked about how we kind of come to the determination of those schools being built. In the budget documents themselves we don't see supporting evidence to understand how the government is identifying those schools of greatest need. I think it is understood that there is a ton of information and supplemental materials behind the scenes that are coming to those decisions. We know that the government receives capital planning documents from each of the school boards across the province. We know that not all of the school boards have the same level of capacity to do kind of, like, assessments in understanding student growth or population growth and that they might be reliant on data coming from a variety of sources.

The minister has let us know that there is, like, a gated system, a point system in determining the schools that are identified in the capital plan, and the minister has suggested that in receiving those capital plans from each of the boards, he does make an effort to ensure that he's delivering on the capital plans for each of those boards as much as possible.

Through the chair, I'd like to ask a little bit more specifically how the ministry prioritizes those capital planning needs from one school division over another. Maybe we could just hear a clear description of how the points system is used. Like, how are points allocated between population growth and safety? How is that, then, overlaid against the capital plans received from individual boards? If you could maybe just give us a little bit more detail on what that system looks like.

Mr. Nicolaides: Sure. Yeah. I'd be happy to. As I mentioned, every spring our school boards provide us with their capital priority projects, and we believe it's best to take their direction and their guidance as to which projects are a top priority and which ones are of lesser priority. We wait to receive that information in the spring – their updated capital list should be coming out soon – and then all of those individual projects are analyzed and assessed. Of course, those are analyzed. As I mentioned, some of the criteria include safety. Obviously, if there's a particular project where a school division is asking for a modernization or an upgrade and there are some serious safety considerations for students and staff, that would put the project at a higher priority.

In addition, we look at utilization rates of school divisions and of the schools that they're requesting, and ones that have higher utilization, of course, would be evaluated higher. More specifically – yes. Here it is. As I mentioned, all submissions are prioritized on evaluation criteria: the categories of health and safety, as we've mentioned, enrolment pressures, building conditions, functionality, programming and legal requirements as well. The criteria for each of these categories are applied to requests from all school jurisdictions, and each project is evaluated using this criteria to identify the level of need and readiness for the project to proceed. So all projects are reviewed and considered in this manner to determine how best to proceed.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Mr. Ellingson: Thank you, Minister, through the chair. That is good information, and maybe I'll get back to you just a little bit more in a moment about the transparency aspect of that points rating system and if that's worked through with the school boards.

9:50

I just want to kind of dig a little bit more into the Calgary board of education. The Calgary board of education, we know, is the largest school board in the province. In their capital plan they've included both the population growth estimates for the city of Calgary along with student enrolment estimates for their own board. In the executive summary of a recent capital plan it notes that the Calgary population has been growing, on average, by over 19,000 people per year but that net migration for Calgary, as we have noted already in this committee this morning – the Calgary metro area but the city of Calgary – has been increasing, and the city of Calgary is anticipating 22,200 people per year over the next four years.

The Calgary board of education has given this consideration in determining their own kind of enrolment growth forecasts over the next five years, anticipating up to 13,000 students. As we've talked about earlier, we've seen that this is a bit of a spike across the province and a spike for the city of Calgary, with almost 7,000 students just last year alone. These numbers don't include the projections for Calgary Catholic, FrancoSud, private or charter schools – just the Calgary board of education – and CBE is accounting for 25 per cent of the student growth across the province.

If we look a little bit at just right next door, when we talk about the Calgary region, Rocky View, which includes Cochrane, Airdrie, and Chestermere, is projecting student growth of about 1,100 students each year, with over 11,000 students over the next 10 years. If you put those side by side, it's about half of the raw number of student growth as the Calgary board of education. Both school divisions are reporting today being at or near capacity or very close to soon being at 100 per cent capacity, and I know that with the Calgary board of education specifically it can be complicated, that 100 per cent capacity.

I know from my colleague who is the Member for Calgary-Acadia that we sometimes joke and banter with one another about how many schools there are in her constituency versus the number of schools in Calgary-Foothills and that with the sheer number of schools in her constituency, which is older, it maybe has not as many kids living there, has lower capacity in enrolment, so that creates challenges.

If we look at kind of all of this information, 19 full construction projects across the province, four of those will be in Rocky View, two for the Calgary board of education. So twice the student growth at CBE versus Rocky View, but Rocky View has twice the number

of new schools that would be going into construction this year. Sixteen schools province-wide in design: 13 of those are for new schools. Seven of those 13 will be in the Calgary area, which is great news – so happy to see that about half of those are for the Calgary area – but of those seven, only two are Calgary board of education. Again, two for Rocky View, so we see kind of an imbalance between these two. For those in planning: eight schools across the province, four new schools. Three of those four are in the Calgary area – again, really good news for the Calgary area – but only one of those for the Calgary board of education.

Through the chair, we know that the Calgary board of education is projecting double the raw student number – not percentage but raw number of students – enrolment growth versus Rocky View, but we see . . .

The Chair: Thank you, Member.

Mr. Ellingson: Did I go through more than five minutes?

The Chair: It's over to the minister now.

Mr. Ellingson: Sorry about that. I didn't get to my question. I wasn't looking at the time.

The Chair: Oh, that's okay. That's it. It's over.
Now we go back to the government members.

Mrs. Petrovic: Thank you, Madam Chair and, through you, to the minister for his hard work on this file. I appreciate the direction you guys are heading. As a mother of two I'm really excited about a lot of the things that are on your file. One of them that I was hoping we could chat a little bit about is collegiate schools here in Alberta. We were recently at an event together in Lethbridge, talking about one of these secondary educations that here in Alberta we're able to offer.

Outcome 3 of the Alberta Education business plan is to ensure that Alberta students "have access to a variety of learning opportunities to enhance competitiveness in the modern economy." It lists the collegiate schools as one of the opportunities to continue to be supported on page 38. Through the event that we were just at at Lethbridge College, I was hoping that you would be able to expand on what makes these schools so unique as opposed to other schools and on some of the programs that they offer and whether or not we're publicly funding these, how much in 2024 the ministry is planning on investing in them, and how this money is going to be used to expand their operations. I'm just hoping that we could expand a little bit on that.

The Chair: Thank you, Member.
Minister.

Mr. Nicolaides: Yeah. Sure. Happy to. Indeed, it was great to be down in Lethbridge with you. I actually have the pen from the southern Alberta collegiate institute that they gave me there, plus a small, mini level and a tape measure that they . . .

The Chair: Minister, that's awesome, but can you please direct the conversation through the chair?

Mr. Nicolaides: Of course. Yes, Madam Chair. I have an amazing southern Alberta collegiate institute pen here as well as other goodies from their trade event. Apologies that I didn't bring you a pen, but next time I'll be sure to do that. But thank you for the reminder, Madam Chair.

Indeed, collegiate schools and collegiate programs are incredibly exciting and incredibly innovative. Of course, they have opportunity

to provide partnerships with postsecondary partners and industry. Again, just down in Lethbridge on Friday – I think that was Friday. Sure. Madam Chair, I think it was Friday when we were down there. It was really exciting because we were able to hear directly from many of the industry partners, directly from some of the students, directly from some of the teachers. You could see how the concept of collegiate schools really brings multiple different partners together to help students find programming that is really of interest and expedites fundamentally their postsecondary journey, and that's really exciting to see. So this is certainly something that's of priority to the government. It's certainly something that we want to expand.

We want to provide funding to encourage more school boards to develop collegiate programs and schools, so we have provided some funding in Budget '24 to support this goal. In our capital plan we've allocated just over \$64 million over the next three years specifically to expand the collegiate model. As well, there is additional funding to help support some of the start-up costs associated with beginning and starting up a new collegiate school and a new collegiate program. We expect to see, based on applications that we've received and funding that we'll be providing, in the '24-25 school year seven new collegiate schools begin operations in the upcoming academic school year, which, again, is really encouraging and really exciting to see. As I mentioned, the partnership that they have with postsecondary institutions, with industry partners really helps to integrate the K to 12 experience with postsecondary options and postsecondary pathways. There are a variety of these different projects occurring across the province, and we are providing and earmarking funding in Budget '24 to help support these initiatives.

Mrs. Petrovic: Thank you, Madam Chair and through you to the minister. It was an absolutely amazing event to be able to hear from the youth within that program as well, so thank you to the minister for that response and for attending that to hear the stories of those children.

Moving on and talking about education within Alberta and the differences that we have and the options that are available to us, our publicly funded charter schools, it's an innovation that only Alberta provides here in Canada. It's providing some unique programming and education opportunities to students and their parents, and I'm so thankful that we have that opportunity to be able to choose, that this is an option for us. We're reaching the 30-year anniversary of the public charter schools being created here in Alberta. Will the minister commit to continuing the legacy of the strong support for charter schools here in Alberta?

10:00

Outcome 3 in the 2024 business plan explains that the ministry will provide innovative learning opportunities to enhance the competitiveness in a modern economy, again on page 38. Are you able to explain some of the unique programming that the public charter schools offer and, once again, how Budget 2024 will reflect our government's commitment to the public chartered schools and essentially how many new spaces are being created through these chartered school projects?

Thank you.

Mr. Nicolaides: Sure. Maybe just on the last piece, when all of the current charter school projects that we have under way are completed, we anticipate that that will result in just over 8,000 additional student spaces. We are seeing a lot of growth and a lot of enrolment demand at many of our charter schools. I was recently at the grand opening of a charter school in Calgary. They had

commented during the grand opening celebrations and ceremonies that there are hundreds and hundreds of families on wait-lists to access their programming.

To your point about: what do some of these charter schools look like? What kind of specialized programming do they look like? This one was the Alberta Classical Academy, so they really look at implementing the curriculum through a really kind of classical, liberal-arts-based education lens, focusing quite a bit on history and art and drama and classics and all of the other kind of key foundations that you might traditionally find in a liberal-arts-based education.

There are STEM-based charter schools that focus on technology and innovation and math. There's the Calgary Arts Academy that delivers curriculum through the immersion of fine arts, visual arts, music, drama. There's a variety of different charter schools that have areas of specialization. Of course, that's always something that is of interest to parents. Parents may really want their kids to excel in areas of fine arts if their kids have particular interest or exceptional abilities in that area, and having a charter school that specifically caters to that can be a good benefit. I know many of our public school divisions also have a lot of diverse programming to be able to accommodate the diverse needs of parents and families.

In addition, I'm also familiar with the Westmount Charter School in Calgary, which I think is the only charter school in the province or the only school in the province – I stand to be corrected, so please don't quote me – that focuses their programming specifically for gifted students. Gifted students: oftentimes not just academically but may be quite different in their emotional understanding, their ability to absorb information, including sound, lights, and other information. So they really focus on providing a very customized and tailored experience to gifted students, recognizing that no two gifted students are the same and have very different needs and challenges.

It's definitely something that we're committed to supporting and expanding. More specifically we'll be providing \$59 million in Budget '24 over the next three years to support funding for facilities, facility improvement, retrofit, furniture, and other pieces that help support the development and operation of charter schools. That's something that we'll certainly be continuing. More specifically just to break down that \$59 million, because I have 10 seconds left: \$50 million over three years specifically for charter facilities and \$8.9 million over three years is in the Ministry of Infrastructure's targets for charter facilities.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Minister.

Back over to the Official Opposition.

Member Brar: Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you, everyone, for being here, and I appreciate the minister answering the questions. I'm incredibly proud to be part of this amazing team sitting on this side and trying to do their best to represent what they were elected to do. My friend and my colleague Court Ellingson, the MLA for Calgary-Foothills, did his best to explain. By the time he got to the question, he was out of time, so I will try to include that question as well.

We'll start from there, knowing that Kincora-Sage Hill is sixth on CBE's priority list, and there is ample evidence that there are population growth needs. The question is: why was the Kincora-Sage Hill school not included in the capital plan even though there was ample evidence of population growth and CBE has put forward the list as well? The ministry looks into that list and decides based on that list that has been put forward.

Mr. Nicolaides: Sure. Yeah. Thank you. Specifically to the Kincora school, I believe – I can't recall specifically. If memory serves me correct, I think it was number 10 or 11 on CBE's priority list for new schools. I'll have my team just pull up their most recent capital list, just so we can be precise about where exactly that project is on their capital list. To your question, we take direction from our school boards about the top-priority projects and work to provide funding and support to move those top-priority projects forward as quickly as possible. In Budget '24 we have provided funding to move their top five projects forward.

Their first priority was a new K to 4 school in Evanston; that's receiving full construction funding. Their second priority was for a new high school in Cornerstone, I think in the member's riding; that's receiving design funding. Their third priority was for a new K to 4 school in Redstone, also, I think, in the member's riding; that one will receive design funding. A new 5 to 9 school in Saddle Ridge may also be in the member's riding – no, that one's not – that one will receive planning funding. The modernization of the Annie Gale school will receive design funding.

The top five projects are moving forward, and we'll continue to work with the school board in moving their top-priority projects forward. I'm not sure if we were able to see where the Kincora school is on their capital list, but we still have about seven minutes, so I'll come back to you when we're able to dig that up.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Please proceed, Member.

Member Brar: Sure. Thank you, Madam Chair. As the minister has just mentioned, in the three-year school capital plan for 2024 until '27 for Calgary board of education – I did get a chance to go through that document. On page 27 of the document the Redstone school has been ranked as number 2 priority for construction. As the minister mentioned, the government plans to build and modernize 32 new school projects in the budget. I was looking and going through the documents from the previous years.

Mr. Long: Point of order.

Member Brar: There were . . .

The Chair: Sorry. Just one moment, Member. A point of order has been called.

Please proceed, Member.

Mr. Long: Thank you, Chair. Under 23(b), "to matters other than the question under discussion." I believe the member opposite is asking a line of questioning around the Calgary board of education plan, and I believe that we're here to discuss government estimates, not the Calgary board of education plan specifically.

The Chair: Is there someone that's going to – Ms Goehring, please proceed.

Ms Goehring: Thank you. I believe that this is a matter of debate. I believe that the member is talking about estimates, and it's not a point of order. The member is talking about the estimates, and he will be able to tie it in within his next few comments.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you so much, members. At this moment I don't find this to be a point of order, but thank you, Member, for speaking up.

If you'd kindly proceed.

Member Brar: Thank you, Madam Chair. As I was talking, there were 32 new school projects that were included in this budget, and 20 of them were included in the previous year's budget as well, which means that we'll get to see 12 new school projects. The reason I'm stating these facts is because these 32 new projects do not include Redstone or Cornerstone schools even though Redstone school was ranked the number 2 priority in the construction funding from CBE.

Madam Chair, through you, I would like to ask the minister: what is the actual reason that this government is not giving the full construction funding to the school which is on number 2 priority of CBE? Where is the funding, and when can the parents and residents expect that funding?

10:10

Mr. Nicolaides: Sorry, Madam Chair; just if the member can provide clarity. Sorry. I missed it. Was that for the Cornerstone school or for the Redstone school or both?

Member Brar: The Redstone school.

Mr. Nicolaides: Thank you for the clarification, Member, for the Redstone school. Yes. Right now I just was able to pull it up. The Redstone elementary school is number 3 on the Calgary board of education's capital priority. It was a new request, so the only time that it appeared on their capital list was last spring. It was a new request that they just put on. Of course, it's important, as I mentioned, that we defer to our school divisions about which projects are of priority. We saw that this one came on the list as a new request last spring, as a new urgent request, and we have moved it forward very quickly by moving it into design so that that school can begin to do the design work that's necessary. They can hire architects and start designing the project. Once the design work is complete, then it will be a very strong candidate to receive full construction funding in the future.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.
Member?

Member Brar: Thank you, Madam Chair. There is another issue that I would like to highlight, and I was hoping that it would have been included in the budget, or it could have been, so I would ask on that part. The reason is because children are being bused to faraway schools in Calgary-North East, and I'm sure this is the case in many other areas in the province, too. Many parents have brought forward this issue to me, to my office, and I was informed that CBE has contracted a transportation company to bus the children.

I had meetings with school board trustees and the CBE chair as well, and the issue that came up was that the drivers are not able to make enough pay, and that makes the transportation company and CBE a bit hard to recruit the drivers, to attract the drivers to this profession. It makes life overall difficult for parents and kids because they have to travel and they have to miss their work when buses cancel on time.

My question: is there any wage top-up program that might help drivers to boost their pay and help attract new drivers in this profession, if the minister is considering that? And what is the government doing in this budget to address the shortage of bus drivers other than the training program that the minister mentioned earlier?

The Chair: Thank you, Member.
Minister?

Mr. Nicolaides: Yeah. Thank you. Yeah, that's an important point, and we have worked in the past to take a close look at actions and

steps that the government can take to help strengthen transportation within the province. In 2020 our government commissioned the Student Transportation Task Force to go and talk to our partners, busing companies, other providers, to get a better understanding of some of the challenges that currently exist and come up with potential solutions. I think an important thing to highlight, which I mentioned in my opening remarks, but I think it's important to reaffirm as well now, is that according to the latest reporting of our school boards almost all routes have a full-time, permanent driver. This is an important step forward in making sure there's stability around our routes.

Budget '24 will provide \$492 million for the '24-25 fiscal year for school jurisdictions for transportation funding. That's an increase of almost \$80 million, or 19 per cent, from the '23-24 fiscal year. So we are taking steps to increase funding to our school divisions to be able to support transportation.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Minister.

We'll go back over to the government side. Please proceed, Member.

Mr. Singh: Thank you, Madam Chair. Good morning, Minister. I appreciate you being here with us today. I also want to acknowledge the work you have done in the ministry ensuring the delivery of a student-centred education system that promotes the success of children and students.

My questions are on the classroom complexity and learning opportunities here. Minister, I have heard from many parents the challenges of having a child with a severe disability or other learning delays going through the education system and the importance of additional supports for their child such as program unit funding. I know you have taken the issue seriously as your department conducted a comprehensive stakeholder engagement to learn about strengthening program unit funding. On page 39 of the business plan key objective 4.2 explains that your ministry will provide specialized learning supports to address classroom complexity such as in the case of students with learning delays and severe disabilities. Please, Minister, what does Budget 2024 provide for program unit funding, and what does it do to address the long-term sustainability of the funding?

The Chair: Thank you, Member.
Minister.

Mr. Nicolaides: Thank you, Madam Chair. Thank you to the member for the important question. I think we can all agree it's absolutely critical and vital to ensure that our youngest learners are able to receive the specialized support that they need, particularly if they have delays or severe disabilities. The research and the evidence in this area are crystal clear. Work that can be done to help support students early on is vital to their long-term academic and career and life success. It's critically important to the government and to me personally as well to ensure that we have the right level of support for our youngest learners, and that includes PUF, which, as I mentioned, provides funding to address the very unique and nuanced educational needs of children that have delays or severe disabilities.

In addition to that, there's also incredible work occurring in early literacy and numeracy screening and assessment. We have mandatory reporting currently under way for all kids in grades 1 to 3 whereby we screen their literacy and numeracy abilities and provide intervention support to be able to have those kids operate at grade level if they are behind. These programs are incredibly effective. Many provinces around the country are looking to replicate the work that Alberta has done. We should all be very

proud. I believe we are really a vanguard in this work. What we're doing in this regard is quite exceptional and quite unique. I understand that Ontario is looking to effectively copy some of that early literacy work and potentially other provinces as well.

But just coming back to PUF – apologies for the long-windedness; I think that's something that we all have; I guess you wouldn't be a politician if you didn't have a microphone and blabber on for a while, so apologies for that – just coming back to program unit funding more specifically, yes, one of the items that the Premier asked me to pay particular attention to in my mandate letter was around the PUF program. The Premier directed me to take a look at the program and to explore how we can improve services and programs to children with severe disabilities and delays, so we got to work right away. In September and October, through the fall, in advance of the upcoming budget, we went to talk with those who know best – parents and providers who deliver the PUF program – to see how the program could be modified or improved to ensure that children receive the supports that they need. Through that engagement we heard that there were some things that we could do, so we took their advice, and we implemented some new recommendations.

I was very pleased to be able to receive additional funding for the PUF program. Budget '24, if passed, will provide in this budget year \$6 million in additional funding to support the PUF program, and it also forecasts to increase funding to the PUF program by \$10 million in year 2 and in year 3, so, of course, a cumulative new funding investment of \$26 million. What this will do and where the funding is going is to open up two enrolment dates, September and February.

10:20

Previously there was only one enrolment date, which was December 1 if memory serves me correctly. If you missed that date, you would have to wait, effectively, a whole year to be able to enrol your child into a program and receive those specialized services. With the additional funding, we'll be able to open up two dates, so if a student is identified as having some delays or severe disabilities and requires additional support, they can register in both September and/or in February and start receiving those services much more quickly and in a much more timely way.

Just on this point, I do want to note as well that I think it's important to remind the committee and put on record that Alberta – and Jeff or others can kick me under the table if I'm wrong – I believe is the only province in all of Canada that provides this level of educational support and services for students with severe disabilities and delays as young as two years and eight months. Other provinces do not provide this level of service to students that young. Jeff hasn't kicked me yet, so I assume that I'm correct in my commentary there. Again, it is a priority for the government of Alberta and, I think, all of us collectively as Albertans to make sure that some of our youngest learners have the customized and tailored support that they need so that they can be successful.

Mr. Singh: Thank you, Minister, for such a detailed answer. Thank you, Madam Chair.

My second question is that I have heard from many parents and teachers about the new complexity in the classroom, particularly involving mental health challenges that students are facing. Many classrooms are dealing with new needs of mental health and students' well-being, supports that were not as necessary before the pandemic. Page 80 of the fiscal plan explains that the future growth in the Education budget will be used to support the emerging needs of the system amongst other things. How does Budget 2024 support the emerging mental health needs of Alberta's students? What new

initiatives has Alberta Education been undertaking to support student well-being, and what are some of the supports and services that the money invested into this initiative will accomplish? What are the reported details of these initiatives in our education system?

Thank you, Minister.

The Chair: Thank you, Member.
Minister.

Mr. Nicolaides: Sure. Thank you, Madam Chair. I'll try to be brief. In Budget '24 there's approximately \$30 million that's being earmarked and available for the '24-25 school year to help provide mental health support and wellness for students and, as well, to continue to recover from and support learning loss due primarily to the pandemic. Specifically, in '24-25 \$10 million will be available to support students who are at risk in their literacy and numeracy skills.

This connects back into what I was mentioning previously with respect to the assessment that occurs in grades 1 to 3 around early literacy and numeracy. Of course, you can do the assessment, and if you identify that there are students who have literacy and numeracy challenges, you need to ensure that there's adequate support so that school divisions can hire additional educational assistants or others to provide customized and tailored interventions for those students. I've seen some of these programs in action, and they're quite effective, whereby they identify the students that may have literacy and numeracy challenges. They'll pull them out of class for a period of time throughout the day and provide some targeted intervention supports to them, and the intervention supports are incredibly effective and get students back up to grade level quite quickly, within the span of a few months, with the right level of targeted support. So that's something that we want to continue to provide.

But coming back to mental health, we are also in the middle of two-year mental health pilots that we're working with our school boards around.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Minister.

We'll go back over to the Official Opposition for their next round of questioning.

Ms Chapman: Thank you. On what we were just on, through the chair, can the minister just confirm: was it \$30 million for mental health in Budget '24?

Mr. Nicolaides: Yes. That's correct: \$30 million in funding in '24-25 for mental health and learning loss support.

Ms Chapman: Learning loss support. Got you. Okay. So that's a \$10 million reduction from the previous budget. Budget 2023 had allocated \$40 million in that category, well-being and mental health. I'm just wondering if the minister can answer. When we look at these numbers, it can be a bit challenging to get a picture of what it actually looks like. What does it do? What does \$30 million do versus what does \$40 million do? Do we have figures on how many additional specialized assessments were made available to students in 2023 and maybe what kind of a reduction we'd be looking at given the lower budget amount for '24 and then also just what kind of additional supports were provided to address learning loss this past school year?

Mr. Nicolaides: Yeah. We'll pull up the number from previous years with respect to funding that was provided for learning loss. As I mentioned a moment ago, there's \$10 million being set aside for the '24-25 school year specifically to help address learning loss.

Yeah. I'm being told it was \$10 million in the previous year as well. I have a better breakdown. Here we go.

Ms Pillipow: You don't like my sticky note?

Mr. Nicolaides: The sticky note is nice, but the chart is a little bit better.

Of course, there are some changes to the funding that's provided here. Obviously, the key parameter that we've been using is to support learning loss as a result of the pandemic. The further away that we get, the less need there is as we're addressing some of these challenges. Obviously, as an immediate onset or a consequence of COVID, a much more significant amount was available. There was \$45 million available in the '21-22 fiscal year to support learning loss. That's down to \$10 million for the current year. Again, once we are able to address the learning loss, the direct learning loss – obviously, the demand decreases over time as we're able to address some of the immediate learning loss. There's still a loss there, there's still loss that exists as a result of COVID, and that's why we're continuing to provide funding to help ensure that those students receive the support that they need.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.
Member.

Ms Chapman: Thank you. Okay. If I am understanding – and please correct me if I've heard this wrong – of the \$30 million bucket for mental health and well-being, \$10 million is for learning loss. That amount is the same this year, '24-25, as it was in '23-24, but the total bucket for that mental health and wellness in 2023 was \$40 million, and then this one is \$30 million. What programs have seen that \$10 million reduction, or where does that \$10 million reduction happen in that bucket?

Mr. Nicolaides: Yeah. Thanks, Jeff, for the clarification. I think it was as I suspected.

One of the things that we had undertaken a couple of years back was funding to school boards to support mental health pilots. There were 80 pilots that were ultimately approved, and of course a pilot is a temporary program, a temporary construct and initiative. As some of those pilots begin to lapse, funding for those lapses as well. Once all the pilots are coming to a close and as they complete, we will be sitting down with professionals from the University of Calgary and others to explore and evaluate the effectiveness of these mental health pilots to then help inform government policy and next steps with respect to mental health supports in schools.

Of course, I'm sure that there are some pilots that have worked very well and some that maybe didn't quite achieve their intended outcomes. We're really excited, though, by the fact that we have 80 projects across the entire province. Some are really customized, of course, recognizing diverse needs of learners from different communities, diverse backgrounds. I'm really looking forward to conducting this analysis of these pilots so that we can see what's really working for a particular community or a particular segment of the population and then use that to help inform some of our next steps.

10:30

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Ms Chapman: Okay. So if I understand that correctly, the \$10 million reduction between last year and this year all falls into that mental health pilot program?

Mr. Nicolaides: Correct.

Ms Chapman: Okay. Thank you.

I've got two more little specific questions that just came up from listening to the members opposite. So \$6 million additional for PUF this year. What's the total funding bucket for PUF this year?

The Chair: Thank you, Member.

Mr. Nicolaides: The total is \$209 million.

Ms Chapman: I literally think of it as buckets, like we're just carrying around buckets of money. I'm sorry. Can you just clarify for me, because I'm new to the documents: like, in which budget line, where do we find PUF in here?

Mr. Nicolaides: Yeah. If memory serves me correct – and I'll let Lora kick me if I'm wrong – it should be contained in the \$1.5 billion line item that is labelled as learning support funding. I'll pull up the main estimates and reference it for you.

Ms Chapman: Element 3.1?

Mr. Nicolaides: Element 3.2. If you're looking at the main estimates, it's 3.2. I don't have it directly in front of me, but it's encapsulated in the \$1.5 billion that you'll see there.

Ms Chapman: That tracks. That's the 1.5 line.

Okay. Three minutes. I'm just going to go back to weighted moving average, which is where I had left, because I just had a couple more questions around that. I had given the example of Calgary Catholic. I don't mean to pick on Calgary Catholic; it's just that Calgary is where I live. I just have a little bit more knowledge on the schools in the area. Because of the weighted moving average, you know, even though their actual enrolment is 61,584 – I mean, basically, what it means is that they've got about 3,000 students that aren't included in the calculation for funding. We know that Alberta has the lowest funding per student in Canada. It's clear that the funding model is leaving thousands of students unfunded, which is going to translate to less than adequate funding for Alberta students, especially in those metro areas, so I do find this really concerning. Can the government provide the figure for how many students end up not being funded because of the weighted moving average, and how much is this number set to grow with population growth projections over the next three years?

The Chair: Thank you, Member.
Minister.

Mr. Nicolaides: Sure. Every year in the development of our budget and submission we defer to the expertise of our school boards. We collect information from our school boards about their current enrolment levels, and we subsequently also collect information from our school boards about their projections. We take their projections, and we use that to inform the determination as to how much additional funding the ministry will request. So based on the cumulative projections of our school boards, cumulatively they are expecting to see 33,000 additional students, and we have received a funding increase of 4.4 per cent, or just shy of \$400 million, and that's to fund 33,000 additional students. The funding is provided and made available to meet the projections of students.

As I mentioned earlier, oftentimes the projections can be off. We're seeing this a lot this year and previous year, where the enrolment is quite sudden and significant and beyond, I think, anybody's forecast or expectations. So there is a mechanism to accommodate for that through the supplemental enrolment growth grant. Should a situation arise where a school division sees many more students enrolled than what they were originally forecasting,

we explore that in the fall, when we have some more certainty over the total enrolment numbers, and provide additional funding through the supplemental enrolment growth grant, as we did in November of the past year and provided an additional \$30 million.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Minister.

We'll go back over to the government side for questions.

Mr. Lundy: Great. Thank you, Madam Chair, and through you to the minister I'd like to thank him and the ministry for all their hard work. As we've heard from other members today, there's growing enrolment across the province, some complex needs in the classroom. Again I'd like to extend my thanks to the minister, and I would certainly like to acknowledge the announcement for the modernization of the Corinthia Park school right in Leduc. I know that's a great project for our community and will ensure that kids get to continue to roam those hallways and classrooms for years to come, so I certainly appreciated that announcement. Of course, Beaumont as well: we're not immune from the pressures of growth and enrolment, so I look forward to continuing to engage with the minister about the importance of a new high school for Beaumont to adapt to some of these growing pressures.

I'd like to turn our attention to a very important outcome, that being First Nations, Métis, and Inuit students and their success in our education system. Our government, of course, is very committed to our Indigenous partnerships and ensuring the success. I think, personally, of the Alberta Indigenous Opportunities Corporation as a really key government initiative, but I think we can all agree around this table that that success starts in the education system, so I certainly want to acknowledge how important that is. Of course, that's acknowledged. It is in the business plan, of course. One of the main outcomes in the business plan is to ensure that Alberta's First Nations, Métis, and Inuit students are successful. We know Alberta has 48 First Nations and eight Métis settlements providing education to approximately 50,000 First Nations, Métis, and Inuit students just through provincial schools.

Madam Chair, through you to the minister, can you please explain the importance of ensuring that all students in Alberta are offered the same opportunity of success? And if you wouldn't mind maybe expanding on what specific programming and pilots there are to help improve outcomes of First Nation, Métis, and Inuit students.

Thank you.

Mr. Nicolaides: Sure. Madam Chair, thank you. I'd be happy to. Thank you to the member for the important question, and I'll keep an eye out for his advocacy over a new high school I think he mentioned in Beaumont. Happy to work with him and other MLAs to move needed projects forward in our growing communities. There are many, as the member notes, in the greater Edmonton area and in the Calgary metropolitan region.

Your point is particularly important. It's essential that we work to ensure that all students have strong outcomes, and we do work very collaboratively and closely together with Indigenous communities across the province to support Indigenous students and their fundamental success. Just recently I had the opportunity to participate with the Premier at the Confederacy of Treaty Six round-table and have conversations about education and other priorities of the confederacy, which was incredibly beneficial. With respect to some of the specific funding and opportunities that we provide, I think it's important to mention first and foremost, of course, that First Nations, Métis, and Inuit students in the education

system are entitled to and eligible to receive all grants that are provided under the funding model.

Local school boards, of course, continue to have the autonomy to best allocate resources that they see fit. I was recently at a school in east Calgary – I forgot the name; apologies – where the school provides a significant amount of nutrition programming for students, and we have recently increased funding for the school nutrition program to help ensure that students have adequate nutrition to be able to support their success. A significant component if not all of the students, I think, at the school were Indigenous, and it was exciting to see how the staff is working to provide nutritious options to all of those students.

But, more specifically, you asked, I think, about some of the dollars and opportunities. Budget '24 will be providing just around \$86 million for the '24-25 school year so that they can provide instructional supports specifically to improve outcomes for First Nations, Métis, and Inuit students and as well to help support some of the implementations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's recommendations.

10:40

As well, two new programs were introduced last year to support Indigenous student learning. There was the bridging classrooms to communities grant, which I was able to announce a few months back. This is a pilot program that will help Indigenous communities and school authorities build stronger relationships together. The hope with respect to the outcome of these programs is that (a) they're able to support student success, of course, and, secondly, that they're able to promote and advance reconciliation. There's also the community reconciliation grant pilot program, that promotes reconciliation and healing by fostering engagement between Indigenous organizations and schools to support Indigenous students in schools in a really comprehensive and holistic way.

Those are some of the key highlights that the ministry is advancing and funding to help support the success of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit students.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Mr. Lundy: Great. Thank you, through the chair, to the minister for that important information. I'd like to ask a bit of a follow-up in relation to high school completion. We know this is a very important metric across the entire education system, and I think it has particular relevance for our First Nation, Métis, and Inuit students, particularly as high school completion is, of course, important for entry into the labour force and postsecondary programs. On page 38 of the business plan performance measure 2(a) states that in '21-22 71.3 per cent of self-identified First Nations, Métis, and Inuit students completed high school within five years of entering grade 10. I see that the target for this year is 71.5, so through the chair to the minister: what actions are being undertaken by your ministry to ensure that this target is reached? Also, if you're able to elaborate on how this target is set.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.
Minister.

Mr. Nicolaides: Thank you, Madam Chair. Thank you to the member. Indeed, of course, we want to work towards and ensure that all students are able to complete their studies and move on to postsecondary options or strong career opportunities, and there are

some significant gaps in education outcomes, that I think you've noted, between First Nation, Métis, and Inuit students and all students. More specifically – I have the number here – the high school completion rate for Indigenous students in Alberta is about 17 per cent lower, and the dropout rate is about twice the provincial rate.

Obviously, there's some individual work that needs to take place here to help address these issues, and there are a number of strategies that the ministry is working on. As an example, we're providing a grant – sorry. That grant was provided in the '22-23 year, \$2.6 million to 19 First Nations educational authorities, and we'll be increasing the grant to \$3.6 million for this school year to help provide stronger support to First Nations education authorities. We'll also be working to establish a research project and partnership between Alberta Education and MacEwan University to collaborate on First Nation, Métis, and Inuit postsecondary pathways, with more information for that to come. I realize I'm almost out of time here, so apologies; I can't provide all of the details.

But I did mention the bridging classrooms to communities grant. I don't think I mentioned the amount specifically to that. There's \$3.5 million that's being provided for the '24-25 year to support that program, which, as I mentioned, helps to build stronger connections between local school authorities and Indigenous communities. There are a number of efforts that are under way, including a lot of the agreements that we have to strengthen educational outcomes.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

We'll go back over to the Official Opposition for the next block.

Ms Chapman: Thank you. So 86 per cent of Alberta teachers report classroom complexity has increased. The ATA has also reported that over half of teachers have noticed a decrease in supports available to students. Over half of Alberta teachers are reporting that students they recommend for specialized assessments will not receive them in this school year. Specialized assessments like psychoeducational assessments are critical for students. They ensure students, teachers, and their families have the knowledge and information needed to support them in their learning, and this means better outcomes as they age as we know that early intervention is key.

A front-end, robust investment in student success early on ultimately makes for a better province. Despite this, on page 69 of the estimates documents support for students has only increased by \$34 million. To keep pace with population and inflation, this number should have at minimum increased by nearly \$58 million. Through the chair, can the minister please let us know: what is the reasoning, given the dire complexity challenges in Alberta's classrooms, to not fund this in line with population and inflation growth?

The Chair: Minister.

Mr. Nicolaides: Thank you, Madam Chair. We provide funding to our school authorities based on their projections. School authorities provide us projections with respect to their total enrolment, number of students that may speak English as an additional language, and we work to provide funding based on their overall projections. Of course, some students may need some tailored and individualized support and targeted services, so the government of Alberta is increasing its investment in these areas to ensure that students have the adequate support that they need.

As I mentioned earlier, there's about \$1.5 billion that we are planning to spend this year alone in learner supports, and this is, of course, a large bucket, to use the member's vernacular, to help support students that need additional services and that need additional support. This includes the new grant that was announced in the last budget, the classroom complexity grant, of \$126 million over three years, and that's specifically to address classroom complexity. That also includes the increases to PUF, that we talked about a little bit earlier, to help ensure that students have that support.

I know you mentioned specialized assessments, so I have a little bit more information about that. Oh, here we go. I have a lot more information about that. Yes. Specifically, with respect to some of the specialized assessments, as you mentioned, we do provide \$10 million in our budget to help support access to specialized assessments because, as you mentioned, and I completely agree – apologies, Chair. As the member mentioned and on which I completely agree, providing early support and early intervention is key and is absolutely critical, so it's a priority for the ministry to ensure that there is access to psychologists, speech-language pathologists, and others. That's why we continue to provide that funding and are increasing funding broadly to PUF and to other areas to ensure that students have the support and services that they need.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Ms Chapman: A little sidebar maybe, but, through the chair, is it possible for us to see a breakdown of the budget line 3.2, the \$1.5 billion? We've talked about a few of the subbuckets in that big bucket, because we've got PUF, the assessments. I believe that's where SLS funding lives as well. Is there a breakdown of that we can see?

The Chair: Minister.

Mr. Nicolaides: Yeah. I may ask my team to chime in on that one, but it's all detailed out in the specific grants that are provided, some of the grants that I mentioned before: the refugee grant, the school nutrition grant, and those other pieces. It's all broken down through those individual and respective grants. I know, of course, the estimates just present a very high-level overview of big buckets of funding, but in addition, of course, the details will be provided through the funding manual once that is finalized and made available to school authorities. More detail is provided through the funding manual.

10:50

Jeff is excusing himself from commenting because he said: yes, that's the answer. So I don't think they'll have anything else in addition to add to that.

The funding manual will be coming out in about a week or so, where, of course, school authorities and other education partners or interested members of the public or MLAs can see the specific details about individual grants and programs and where all those large buckets are divided into smaller buckets.

Ms Chapman: Okay. I feel like you've got it all – through the chair, I feel like the minister has it all in front of him. I feel like we probably could all just take a look at it right now, but I will wait for one week, until the funding manual comes out.

Back on to classroom complexity, just, you know, the unwillingness of this government to fund support for students adequately is going to have a snowball effect because every year

that these supports go underfunded – I do understand that we’re talking about a big bucket when we talk about this \$1.5 billion, but that doesn’t mean it’s an appropriately sized bucket. It does not mean that we are providing an appropriate amount of funding for these kiddos with complex needs. That need for support gets more dire as they go unaddressed, challenges become more complex, and then we end up playing catch-up, and it, in the end, costs the province more while leaving students with worse outcomes. So what plans are in place to monitor if the funding provided actually meets the needs of our student population?

The Chair: Thank you, Member.
Minister.

Mr. Nicolaides: Sure. Thank you. Yeah, well, we do collect information, of course, about outcomes and services provided and program delivery. Just as an example, we were talking earlier about specialized assessments and some of those requests for specialized assessments that were made. A very high level of – I think this was for the last academic year. There were a total of 3,368 referrals for specialized assessments that were requested. Approximately 82 per cent of those were for psychological assessments, 13 per cent were for speech-language pathology, 4 per cent were for occupational therapy, and 1 per cent for other assessments, be they physical therapy, video, or other areas. We’re able to, of course, track and monitor how that’s being completed and how that’s being achieved. I’ll ask Jeff to maybe chime in here on the year range for year 1 on the specialized assessment referrals.

But in that year there were about 196 – well, there were; not “about.” Specifically, in zone 1, which includes Grande Prairie, Peace Wapiti, and northwest, 196 total referrals were made for specialized assessments; 196 were completed. In zones 2 and 3, similarly, as an example – I won’t go through all of these – 190 were requested by Parkland school division; 190 were completed. In zone 4, 36 referrals were requested; 36 were completed. In zone 5, 779 referrals were requested; 779 were completed. This is as of March 1, 2024, referring again to the 3,338 referrals that have been made by 48 school authorities. Since that time – I’m sorry. Let me reread this.

As of March 1, 2024, 3,338 referrals have been made; 3,134 assessments have been completed. So we do track to make sure, of course, that dollars are going to the assessments that are required and students are able to receive the supports that they need.

Ms Chapman: Just the completed number: can you just repeat?

Mr. Nicolaides: The completed number is 3,134.

Ms Chapman: Can you just clarify – I don’t know what zone Calgary is. I’m sorry. I don’t have any zones.

Mr. Nicolaides: Calgary is zone 5.

Ms Chapman: Zone 5. And what were the . . .

Mr. Nicolaides: I’ll have to . . .

Ms Chapman: We’re good.

Mr. Nicolaides: . . . find that. I’ll come back to you.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Minister.

We’ll head back over to the government side for the remaining time.

Mr. Boitchenko: Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you to the minister for answering all the questions that both government members and the Official Opposition are asking. Thank you for your amazing team, that’s there to help you with getting all these questions answered. I would like to also note the amazing work the minister is doing in my riding building new schools, especially the new Powerhouse school, that I had an opportunity to tour last month, and what a beautiful, state-of-the art school Alberta is building.

In fact, in the last few years we had two new schools, including Evergreen school in Drayton Valley. I couldn’t help driving by my neighbouring riding in Leduc, where I see another school under construction. So we’re absolutely amazed at the work that this government is doing to build and renovate schools around the province.

I also had an opportunity to actually tour many schools in my riding, and I was overwhelmed with the feedback from both teachers and the school boards on the communication with the government and specifically with the Minister of Education. It was pleasant to see that positive feedback from my constituents.

Furthermore, I know that red tape reduction has been stated to be the top priority in this government. The 2024 business plan lists the goal of continuing to “create efficiencies within the education system by streamlining financial and governance practices” under key objective 4.5. Recently the government implemented a new school planning program to streamline the process of building school projects, on page 39 of the business plan. I’m sure that will add to the efficiency and satisfaction of our school boards and schools in our province, cutting that red tape.

I do have a question. Could the minister please explain how the school planning program works and its purpose? And then a couple of follow-up questions with that would be: how many new schools are entering planning through Budget 2024, and how much will the government be providing to advance planning in Budget 2024 as well?

The Chair: Thank you, Member.
Minister.

Mr. Nicolaides: Sure. Thank you, Madam Chair. I realize there’s just north of a minute left, so I’ll do my very best to answer all of that. With respect to the school planning, the school planning program is intended to allow for further development of project scope and site investigation work and to help clarify and remove and avoid potential risks and identify mitigation strategies and, of course, alleviate cost concerns.

The goal, fundamentally, is to remove barriers and put projects into a better position for project consideration of design and construction in future budget cycles. It’s incredibly important because, as I think I’ve mentioned before, if you announce tomorrow a new school project and no preplanning work has been done or no conversations with the community or anything of that nature, you might catch the school division off on the back foot, not being entirely ready, and then they’re running and scrambling to get into gear to start the planning work, the design work, get everything done, and start building the school.

Again, the Auditor General has had some concerns with that process because we provide them with the total amount, and maybe the total amount isn’t spent in the fiscal year for that project and there’s carry-over, and there have been some concerns around that. I know you mentioned specifically about planning. Although planning dollars do not constitute full approval, a planning investment demonstrates the government recognition of these

projects as being high priority and helps the school division begin preparations for the eventual construction.

The Chair: I apologize for the interruption, but I must advise the committee that the time allotted for this portion of consideration of the ministry's estimates has concluded.

I'd like to remind committee members that we're scheduled to meet this afternoon at 3:30 to continue our discussion of the estimates for the Ministry of Education.

Thank you, everyone. This meeting is adjourned.

[The committee adjourned at 11 a.m.]

