



Second Session, 38th Parliament

OFFICIAL REPORT OF  
DEBATES OF THE  
LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY  
(HANSARD)

**Monday, March 27, 2006**  
**Afternoon Sitting**  
**Volume 8, Number 4**

THE HONOURABLE BILL BARISOFF, SPEAKER

ISSN 0709-1281

**PROVINCE OF BRITISH COLUMBIA**  
(Entered Confederation July 20, 1871)

LIEUTENANT-GOVERNOR  
Her Honour the Honourable Iona V. Campagnolo, CM, OBC

**SECOND SESSION, 38TH PARLIAMENT**

SPEAKER OF THE LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY  
Honourable Bill Barisoff

**EXECUTIVE COUNCIL**

Premier and President of the Executive Council .....	Hon. Gordon Campbell
Minister of State for Intergovernmental Relations .....	Hon. John van Dongen
Deputy Premier and Minister of Education and Minister Responsible for Early Learning and Literacy .....	Hon. Shirley Bond
Minister of Aboriginal Relations and Reconciliation .....	Hon. Tom Christensen
Minister of Advanced Education and Minister Responsible for Research and Technology .....	Hon. Murray Coell
Minister of Agriculture and Lands.....	Hon. Pat Bell
Attorney General and Minister Responsible for Multiculturalism.....	Hon. Wally Oppal, QC
Minister of Children and Family Development.....	Hon. Stan Hagen
Minister of State for Childcare .....	Hon. Linda Reid
Minister of Community Services and Minister Responsible for Seniors' and Women's Issues.....	Hon. Ida Chong
Minister of Economic Development and Minister Responsible for the Asia-Pacific Initiative and the Olympics.....	Hon. Colin Hansen
Minister of Employment and Income Assistance .....	Hon. Claude Richmond
Minister of Energy, Mines and Petroleum Resources .....	Hon. Richard Neufeld
Minister of State for Mining.....	Hon. Bill Bennett
Minister of Environment and Minister Responsible for Water Stewardship and Sustainable Communities .....	Hon. Barry Penner
Minister of Finance.....	Hon. Carole Taylor
Minister of Forests and Range and Minister Responsible for Housing .....	Hon. Rich Coleman
Minister of Health .....	Hon. George Abbott
Minister of Labour and Citizens' Services .....	Hon. Michael de Jong
Minister of Public Safety and Solicitor General.....	Hon. John Les
Minister of Small Business and Revenue and Minister Responsible for Regulatory Reform.....	Hon. Rick Thorpe
Minister of Tourism, Sport and the Arts .....	Hon. Olga Ilich
Minister of Transportation.....	Hon. Kevin Falcon

**LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY**

Leader of the Official Opposition .....	Carole James
Deputy Speaker .....	Sindi Hawkins
Assistant Deputy Speaker .....	Sue Hammell
Deputy Chair, Committee of the Whole.....	Harry Bloy
Clerk of the Legislative Assembly .....	E. George MacMinn, OBC, QC
Clerk Assistant .....	Robert Vaive
Clerk Assistant and Law Clerk .....	Ian D. Izard, QC
Clerk Assistant and Clerk of Committees .....	Craig H. James
Clerk Assistant and Committee Clerk .....	Kate Ryan-Lloyd
Sergeant-at-Arms.....	A.A. Humphreys
Director, Hansard Services .....	Jo-Anne Kern
Legislative Librarian .....	Jane Taylor
Legislative Comptroller.....	Dan Arbic

## ALPHABETICAL LIST OF MEMBERS

Abbott, Hon. George (L)..... Shuswap  
Austin, Robin (NDP)..... Skeena  
Bains, Harry (NDP)..... Surrey-Newton  
Barisoff, Hon. Bill (L)..... Penticton-Okanagan Valley  
Bell, Hon. Pat (L)..... Prince George North  
Bennett, Hon. Bill (L)..... East Kootenay  
Black, Iain (L)..... Port Moody-Westwood  
Bloy, Harry (L)..... Burquitlam  
Bond, Hon. Shirley (L)..... Prince George-Mount Robson  
Brar, Jagrup (NDP)..... Surrey-Panorama Ridge  
Campbell, Hon. Gordon (L)..... Vancouver-Point Grey  
Cantelon, Ron (L)..... Nanaimo-Parksville  
Chong, Hon. Ida (L)..... Oak Bay-Gordon Head  
Chouhan, Raj (NDP)..... Burnaby-Edmonds  
Christensen, Hon. Tom (L)..... Okanagan-Vernon  
Chudnovsky, Dave (NDP)..... Vancouver-Kensington  
Coell, Hon. Murray (L)..... Saanich North and the Islands  
Coleman, Hon. Rich (L)..... Fort Langley-Aldergrove  
Conroy, Katrine (NDP)..... West Kootenay-Boundary  
Coons, Gary (NDP)..... North Coast  
Cubberley, David (NDP)..... Saanich South  
de Jong, Hon. Michael (L)..... Abbotsford-Mount Lehman  
Dix, Adrian (NDP)..... Vancouver-Kingsway  
Evans, Corky (NDP)..... Nelson-Creston  
Falcon, Hon. Kevin (L)..... Surrey-Cloverdale  
Farnworth, Mike (NDP)..... Port Coquitlam-Burke Mountain  
Fleming, Rob (NDP)..... Victoria-Hillside  
Fraser, Scott (NDP)..... Alberni-Qualicum  
Gentner, Guy (NDP)..... Delta North  
Hagen, Hon. Stan (L)..... Comox Valley  
Hammell, Sue (NDP)..... Surrey-Green Timbers  
Hansen, Hon. Colin (L)..... Vancouver-Quilchena  
Hawes, Randy (L)..... Maple Ridge-Mission  
Hawkins, Sindi (L)..... Kelowna-Mission  
Hayer, Dave S. (L)..... Surrey-Tynehead  
Hogg, Gordon (L)..... Surrey-White Rock  
Horgan, John (NDP)..... Malahat-Juan de Fuca  
Horning, Al (L)..... Kelowna-Lake Country  
Ilich, Hon. Olga (L)..... Richmond Centre  
James, Carole (NDP)..... Victoria-Beacon Hill  
Jarvis, Daniel (L)..... North Vancouver-Seymour  
Karagianis, Maurine (NDP)..... Esquimalt-Metchosin  
Krog, Leonard (NDP)..... Nanaimo  
Krueger, Kevin (L)..... Kamloops-North Thompson  
Kwan, Jenny Wai Ching (NDP)..... Vancouver-Mount Pleasant  
Lali, Harry (NDP)..... Yale-Lillooet  
Lee, Richard T. (L)..... Burnaby North  
Lekstrom, Blair (L)..... Peace River South  
Les, Hon. John (L)..... Chilliwack-Sumas  
Macdonald, Norm (NDP)..... Columbia River-Revelstoke  
MacKay, Dennis (L)..... Bulkley Valley-Stikine  
Mayencourt, Lorne (L)..... Vancouver-Burrard  
McIntyre, Joan (L)..... West Vancouver-Garibaldi  
Neufeld, Hon. Richard (L)..... Peace River North  
Nuraney, John (L)..... Burnaby-Willingdon  
Oppal, Hon. Wally, QC (L)..... Vancouver-Fraserview  
Penner, Hon. Barry (L)..... Chilliwack-Kent  
Polak, Mary (L)..... Langley  
Puchmayr, Chuck (NDP)..... New Westminster  
Ralston, Bruce (NDP)..... Surrey-Whalley  
Reid, Hon. Linda (L)..... Richmond East  
Richmond, Hon. Claude (L)..... Kamloops  
Robertson, Gregor (NDP)..... Vancouver-Fairview  
Roddick, Valerie (L)..... Delta South  
Routley, Doug (NDP)..... Cowichan-Ladysmith  
Rustad, John (L)..... Prince George-Omineca  
Sather, Michael (NDP)..... Maple Ridge-Pitt Meadows  
Simons, Nicholas (NDP)..... Powell River-Sunshine Coast  
Simpson, Bob (NDP)..... Cariboo North  
Simpson, Shane (NDP)..... Vancouver-Hastings  
Sultan, Ralph (L)..... West Vancouver-Capilano  
Taylor, Hon. Carole (L)..... Vancouver-Langara  
Thorne, Diane (NDP)..... Coquitlam-Maillardville  
Thorpe, Hon. Rick (L)..... Okanagan-Westside  
Trevena, Claire (NDP)..... North Island  
van Dongen, Hon. John (L)..... Abbotsford-Clayburn  
Whittred, Katherine (L)..... North Vancouver-Lonsdale  
Wyse, Charlie (NDP)..... Cariboo South  
Yap, John (L)..... Richmond-Steveston

## LIST OF MEMBERS BY RIDING

Abbotsford-Clayburn..... Hon. John van Dongen  
Abbotsford-Mount Lehman..... Hon. Michael de Jong  
Alberni-Qualicum..... Scott Fraser  
Bulkley Valley-Stikine..... Dennis MacKay  
Burnaby North..... Richard T. Lee  
Burnaby-Edmonds..... Raj Chouhan  
Burnaby-Willingdon..... John Nuraney  
Burquitlam..... Harry Bloy  
Cariboo North..... Bob Simpson  
Cariboo South..... Charlie Wyse  
Chilliwack-Kent..... Hon. Barry Penner  
Chilliwack-Sumas..... Hon. John Les  
Columbia River-Revelstoke..... Norm Macdonald  
Comox Valley..... Hon. Stan Hagen  
Coquitlam-Maillardville..... Diane Thorne  
Cowichan-Ladysmith..... Doug Routley  
Delta North..... Guy Gentner  
Delta South..... Valerie Roddick  
East Kootenay..... Hon. Bill Bennett  
Esquimalt-Metchosin..... Maurine Karagianis  
Fort Langley-Aldergrove..... Hon. Rich Coleman  
Kamloops..... Hon. Claude Richmond  
Kamloops-North Thompson..... Kevin Krueger  
Kelowna-Lake Country..... Al Horning  
Kelowna-Mission..... Sindi Hawkins  
Langley..... Mary Polak  
Malahat-Juan de Fuca..... John Horgan  
Maple Ridge-Mission..... Randy Hawes  
Maple Ridge-Pitt Meadows..... Michael Sather  
Nanaimo..... Leonard Krog  
Nanaimo-Parksville..... Ron Cantelon  
Nelson-Creston..... Corky Evans  
New Westminster..... Chuck Puchmayr  
North Coast..... Gary Coons  
North Island..... Claire Trevena  
North Vancouver-Lonsdale..... Katherine Whittred  
North Vancouver-Seymour..... Daniel Jarvis  
Oak Bay-Gordon Head..... Hon. Ida Chong  
Okanagan-Vernon..... Hon. Tom Christensen  
Okanagan-Westside..... Hon. Rick Thorpe  
Peace River North..... Hon. Richard Neufeld  
Peace River South..... Blair Lekstrom  
Penticton-Okanagan Valley..... Hon. Bill Barisoff  
Port Coquitlam-Burke Mountain..... Mike Farnworth  
Port Moody-Westwood..... Iain Black  
Powell River-Sunshine Coast..... Nicholas Simons  
Prince George North..... Hon. Pat Bell  
Prince George-Mount Robson..... Hon. Shirley Bond  
Prince George-Omineca..... John Rustad  
Richmond Centre..... Hon. Olga Ilich  
Richmond East..... Hon. Linda Reid  
Richmond-Steveston..... John Yap  
Saanich North and the Islands..... Hon. Murray Coell  
Saanich South..... David Cubberley  
Shuswap..... Hon. George Abbott  
Skeena..... Robin Austin  
Surrey-Cloverdale..... Hon. Kevin Falcon  
Surrey-Green Timbers..... Sue Hammell  
Surrey-Newton..... Harry Bains  
Surrey-Panorama Ridge..... Jagrup Brar  
Surrey-Tynehead..... Dave S. Hayer  
Surrey-Whalley..... Bruce Ralston  
Surrey-White Rock..... Gordon Hogg  
Vancouver-Burrard..... Lorne Mayencourt  
Vancouver-Fairview..... Gregor Robertson  
Vancouver-Fraserview..... Hon. Wally Oppal, QC  
Vancouver-Hastings..... Shane Simpson  
Vancouver-Kensington..... David Chudnovsky  
Vancouver-Kingsway..... Adrian Dix  
Vancouver-Langara..... Hon. Carole Taylor  
Vancouver-Mount Pleasant..... Jenny Wai Ching Kwan  
Vancouver-Point Grey..... Hon. Gordon Campbell  
Vancouver-Quilchena..... Hon. Colin Hansen  
Victoria-Beacon Hill..... Carole James  
Victoria-Hillside..... Rob Fleming  
West Kootenay-Boundary..... Katrine Conroy  
West Vancouver-Capilano..... Ralph Sultan  
West Vancouver-Garibaldi..... Joan McIntyre  
Yale-Lillooet..... Harry Lali



## CONTENTS

Monday, March 27, 2006  
Afternoon Sitting

### Routine Proceedings

	Page
Introductions by Members .....	3289
Introduction and First Reading of Bills.....	3291
Attorney General Statutes Amendment Act, 2006 (Bill 17)	
Settlement of International Investment Disputes Act (Bill 19)	
Hon. W. Oppal	
Finance Statutes Amendment Act, 2006 (Bill 18)	
Hon. C. Taylor	
Christ for the Nations Bible College Act (Bill Pr402)	
D. Hayer	
Statements (Standing Order 25B) .....	3293
MLA's experience in health care system	
R. Sultan	
Education system in B.C.	
J. Horgan	
Joint-replacement surgery pilot project	
J. Yap	
Nature Trust of B.C.	
S. Simpson	
Volunteerism in Langley	
M. Polak	
Emergency response in Powell River	
N. Simons	
Oral Questions.....	3295
Copeman clinic investigation	
C. James	
Hon. G. Abbott	
Public access to Medical Services Commission	
D. Cubberley	
Hon. G. Abbott	
J. Kwan	
Food services in Maple Ridge health care facilities	
M. Sather	
Hon. G. Abbott	
Mental health services on Sunshine Coast	
N. Simons	
Hon. G. Abbott	
Security of Accenture and B.C. Hydro employee information	
G. Gentner	
Hon. R. Neufeld	
Access to B.C. Ferries information	
D. Chudnovsky	
Hon. K. Falcon	
M. Farnworth	
Committee of Supply.....	3300
Estimates: Ministry of Employment and Income Assistance ( <i>continued</i> )	
C. Trevena	
Hon. C. Richmond	
J. Brar	

**Proceedings in the Douglas Fir Room**

Committee of Supply..... 3324  
Estimates: Ministry of Education and Minister Responsible for Early Learning and Literacy  
Hon. S. Bond  
J. Horgan  
C. Evans  
M. Sather

MONDAY, MARCH 27, 2006

The House met at 2:03 p.m.

### Introductions by Members

**Hon. S. Bond:** We are delighted that today begins Education Week in British Columbia. Earlier today in the Legislature we were able to recognize a number of outstanding participants in the public education system. With the forbearance of the House, I would very much like to introduce them to the Legislature today. I know we will want to recognize them.

In the gallery today we have Ariane Ouellette, who is a student at Victor Brodeur secondary school. Ariane was one of 125 finalists taking part in the 13th Dictée des Ameriques being held in the legislative hall of the Quebec National Assembly. I should tell you that Ariane had the best results for a British Columbia student, and she is considering a future — potentially — in political science, which we're very excited about.

Nick Prince is with us. He is an adult learner. Nick had a challenging youth, but on Friday, May 28, 2005, Nick received his grade 12 diploma. He is the first adult to complete his grade 12 requirements at the Canucks Family Education Centre, located at the Britannia Community Services Centre. He is a full-time father of two who was deeply motivated by his seven- and nine-year-old children to actually do what he did. We're very honoured to have him here today.

Carla Peace is with us today. She is a parent who is this year's winner of the George Matthews Award in recognition of her hard work and dedication. She began her volunteering in the Fort Nelson school district.

Donald Hutchinson is with us. He is a teacher at Montgomery Middle School. Donald is one of ten recipients of the 2005 Physical Education Teacher of the Year Award. This award recognizes ten provincial recipients, and he's made an outstanding contribution to students in this province.

Charlie Coleman is with us. He is the principal of Khowhemun Elementary in Duncan. Charlie has been identified as one of the four finalists for the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development's Outstanding Young Educators Award.

[1405]

He is the first Canadian to be recognized and to be a finalist for this North American award. I told Charlie that we're going to be keeping our fingers crossed. He flies to Chicago this week, and I hope he's going to bring it back for B.C. Charlie is with us.

Wendy Herbert, who is a superintendent in the Gulf Islands, received the 2005 Distinguished Service Award given each year to selected B.C. school superintendents who have made a significant and exemplary contribution to public education in British Columbia.

We have Marie Bourgeois, a trustee, and she is the president of the Conseil scolaire francophone. She has been active in the French-speaking community since

her arrival in 1974, and this past year she was made a member of the Order of Canada, in fact, for her exemplary work.

Finally and certainly not least, Rick Thomson is a school bus driver in Armstrong. He was involved in an incident that happened, involving two separate fatalities. In fact, Armstrong and the rest of the province recognize him as a hero.

These are incredible people in the public education system, and they represent the type of people who work with our students every single day. Please help me make them feel very welcome.

**C. James:** Joining us in the gallery today are two constituents of mine, David and Dr. Sandra Rifat. David is on the board of directors of the Union Club and a professor emeritus of fine arts at the University of Toronto. Sandra was an epidemiologist at the Clarke Institute as well as the University of Toronto. They are newly arrived to Victoria. They've been here three years. To those of us in Victoria, they are newly arrived. Would the House please make them very welcome.

**Hon. S. Hagen:** Today I had a wonderful lunch with a special group of people who are also joining us in the gallery today. What makes this group special is that they are all social workers from across British Columbia. This week we celebrate Social Worker Week, a week dedicated to recognize and applaud the dedication and commitment of social work professionals who touch the lives of thousands of British Columbians every day.

Social workers play a vital role by supporting families through difficulties, helping them recognize their strengths, overcome challenges and achieve their goals and aspirations. I am pleased to introduce to the House today Judy Nelson, a child protection social worker from Port Alberni; Shelley Hamilton, a guardianship social worker from Vancouver; Cyndi Robinson, a family service social worker from our Princeton-Keremeos district office; and Kim Hetherington, a resource social worker from the Fraser region.

Paul Jenkinson, another of our ministry social workers from the Fraser region, is also with us today. Paul recently received a Distinguished Service Award for Advocacy in Professional Practice from the B.C. Association of Social Workers.

I would also like to acknowledge Brenda Lewis, social worker and deputy director of child welfare from Prince George. Brenda is the nominee in the leadership category for a Premier's award for excellence and innovation. Please join me in thanking all social workers and these folks in particular for the incredible work they do, and extend to them a very, very warm welcome.

**C. Evans:** Joining us on the floor of the House today is an esteemed gentleman who you can now name in here — Jimmy Doyle, who is the mayor of Golden. I have a bit of a request, hon. Speaker. As you and anybody who has heard the gentleman speak knows, he

has a little bit of trouble with the King's English, and I was wondering if you could maybe assign one of the Pages to sit next to him and interpret in case he can't follow the proceedings. Maybe everybody could make him welcome.

**Hon. L. Reid:** David Hughes is with us today. David has had a long and distinguished career with Sierra Systems. In fact, Sierra Systems, a leader in high technology, is actually 40 years old this year. I would ask the House to acknowledge that and certainly to welcome David to our midst.

[1410]

**C. Trevena:** I'd like the House to welcome Tobin Lange and Katherine Jorgensen, two new constituents of mine. Tobin and Katherine recently moved to B.C. from Denmark. For Katherine it was a homecoming, and for Tobin a new departure. I'm happy to say they chose Campbell River as the place to settle, to start a new business and to work as a nurse. While Katherine and Tobin clearly love the natural landscape of the region, they are perhaps even more impressed by the warmth of people in Campbell River and the North Island. I hope the House will also extend a very warm welcome to Katherine and Tobin.

**Hon. C. Hansen:** It is with great pleasure that we welcome 73 grade five students from Lord Kitchener Elementary School in the riding of Vancouver-Quilchena. They are accompanied by 17 adults, including two of their teachers, Mrs. Dana Peterson and Alison Sharpe. Will the House please help me in making them very welcome.

**L. Krog:** Two items. I don't think I'd be offending the House rules by saying it's good to see the member for West Vancouver-Capilano back in his rightful spot — and, I might add, the picture of health.

I would like to ask the House to make welcome Marilyn Brown. She is a learning assistance and math teacher from Woodlands Secondary in my constituency and a hard-working member of the BCTF as well. If the House would make her welcome.

**Hon. R. Neufeld:** You'll know it's a longstanding issue here in the House that it's not very often that I get to introduce someone from a constituency so far away. So it's a great pleasure for me today — although the Minister of Education ably introduced her — to reintroduce to the House Carla Peace. She is this year's winner of the George Matthews Award. She's a great parent, a good friend and a great citizen in the community of Fort Nelson. Would everyone please make her welcome again.

**C. Wyse:** It is indeed my pleasure today to introduce to the House Tanja and Tad Crowie along with their infant new Caribooster William, along with

Jasana and Harvey Crowie. I look forward to joining them tonight for dinner, and I would ask the House to make them most welcome.

**Hon. G. Abbott:** Like the Minister of Energy and Mines, I rarely get to introduce constituents, so I'd like to introduce one from the Shuswap today. Again, the Minister of Education briefly mentioned Rick Thomson earlier. Rick is a member of the Armstrong fire department as well as a first responder for the Armstrong area, who serves the community of Armstrong remarkably well there.

As the Education Minister noted, Rick has also served school district 83 and certainly the entire Shuswap very well in terms of being a dedicated employee of school district 83. Rick was recognized earlier for his courageous and compassionate efforts under exceptionally difficult circumstances. I'd like the House to please make him welcome.

**M. Sather:** It was my pleasure today to have lunch with three teachers that are here to talk to MLAs about education issues, and I'd like to introduce two of them. Dr. Chiara Anselmo is a grade six-seven teacher, school district 73 in Kamloops. She has been teaching for 20 years. She's also a social justice activist and a strong advocate for public education.

Janice Neden is a learning resource teacher from Kamloops, and she's a product of the public school service of B.C. as well as at the university level. She has a master's degree in education and has taught for over 30 years. Would the House please join me in making them welcome.

[1415]

**R. Cantelon:** I would like to introduce two guests today from the Nanaimo District Teachers Association: Cindy Lowry and Carol McNamee. Cindy is a teacher-librarian at Woodlands Secondary School and past president of the Nanaimo District Teachers Association. Also with us today is Carol — a former English teacher of at least one of my children, as a matter of fact — the current president of the Nanaimo District Teachers Association. I would ask the House to please make them very welcome.

**G. Gentner:** Joining us in the House today is Sylvia Bishop, a dear friend of mine who goes back 25 years. Sylvia has been an elementary school teacher for over 20 years in Delta. She has served on the local teachers association executive and numerous of its committees. She currently works for the B.C. Teachers Federation in the communication and campaign division. Would the House please give her a warm welcome.

**K. Conroy:** It gives me real pleasure today to introduce His Worship Gord Smith, who is mayor of Rossland. He was a councillor and ran in the fall and became the mayor now. It's really a pleasure to have him here in the House with us.



**N. Macdonald:** I just want to introduce again His Worship Jim Doyle, mayor of Golden. He served as mayor and councillor in Golden for a long time before serving here for ten years. He's back as mayor of Golden. He is a personal friend, and he taught me what it's like as an MLA. When I was mayor, he was my MLA, and he sort of set the standard for how you work with local government. So please, again, join me in making him feel welcome.

**D. Routley:** I'd like the House to help me welcome Charlie Coleman, a principal from school district 79, Cowichan Valley. Charlie's mother was my grade 5 teacher, and the only teacher who didn't give me the strap — the only one who did but didn't. I've got to give you a story here.

I was shooting a piece of paper into my desk, not paying attention, and I missed the desk and hit his mom in the back of the head. So she turned around and said: "Who did that?" I just watched my hand go up. She had promised to give the strap to whoever did it, but knowing how honest I was, she took me into the hallway and said: "Look, I'm not going to give the strap, but you're not going to tell anyone that I'm not doing it."

Interjection.

**D. Routley:** There you go.

So I'd like all of us to help make Charlie welcome in the House.

**K. Krueger:** Often things seem very adversarial in this place to the public looking on, but time and again we see how members actually really care about one another. I've actually missed Jimmy Doyle. I remember with fondness the day that he added the words, "Skude mussels," to every item on the menu in the parliamentary dining room. He actually meant to say, "SCUD missile," but it sure sounded like skude mussels to us.

I want to join the member for Nanaimo in celebrating the fact that time and again a certain member of the House proves that just because there's snow on the roof doesn't mean there isn't fire in the furnace. Our senior statesman is not going to let a little thing like a heart attack keep him from his job in this place, and we just really want to welcome him back.

[Applause.]

I hope I said West Vancouver-Capilano.

**Mr. Speaker:** Seeing as how we got down to the end, we'll start all over again. Member for Malahat-Juan de Fuca.

**J. Horgan:** Boy, there's so much to introduce. I have to say that the member for West Vancouver-Capilano has the best hair in the House, and there's not a white one on.

Had I been recognized earlier, I might have got in ahead of my colleague from Cowichan-Ladysmith,

but I want to acknowledge the presence of Charlie Coleman, as well, in the gallery today — the son of the former mayor of Duncan, the nephew of the current councillor in the city of Victoria and an outstanding leader in the Malahat-Juan de Fuca constituency. Fortunately, the traffic was light on the Malahat today, so he was able to get here. The only drawback in Charlie's impressive resume is that when I first met him, he was wearing a Montreal Canadiens jersey, and I certainly don't hold that against him. Welcome, Charlie.

[1420]

**Hon. M. de Jong:** Moira McLean is a respected member of the legislative press gallery. Like most members, I am unaccustomed to using those two terms in the same sentence.

However, she is today celebrating what we generally refer to as a milestone birthday. Now, it is not just outdated notions of chivalry that prevent me from disclosing the milestone. But her eternal youthful countenance would, I'm sure, if I revealed the truth, expose me to charges of having misled the House. So I will not do so except to say happy birthday, Moira, on behalf of all of us here.

**D. Jarvis:** I can't let it stop here. I just want to say, contrary to public belief or most people's belief, that I did only take six years to get through elementary school. So I, too, would like to congratulate those leaving from Lord Kitchener, as an alma mater.

**Mr. Speaker:** Sure there isn't anybody else to introduce? Welcome, everybody that wasn't.

### Introduction and First Reading of Bills

#### ATTORNEY GENERAL STATUTES AMENDMENT ACT, 2006

Hon. W. Oppal presented a message from His Honour the Administrator: a bill intituled Attorney General Statutes Amendment Act, 2006.

**Hon. W. Oppal:** I move that the bill be introduced and read a first time now.

Motion approved.

**Hon. W. Oppal:** I am pleased to introduce Bill 17. The bill amends the following statutes: the Business Corporations Act, Escheat Act, Estate Administration Act, Infants Act, Sheriff Act, Statute Revision Act. Bill 17 also contains provisions to validate appointments made to the Electoral Boundaries Commission.

I move that the bill be placed on the orders of the day for second reading at the next sitting of the House after today.

Bill 17, Attorney General Statutes Amendment Act, 2006, introduced, read a first time and ordered to be

placed on orders of the day for second reading at the next sitting of the House after today.

#### SETTLEMENT OF INTERNATIONAL INVESTMENT DISPUTES ACT

Hon. W. Oppal presented a message from Her Honour the Lieutenant-Governor: a bill intituled Settlement of International Investment Disputes Act.

**Hon. W. Oppal:** I move that the bill be introduced and read a first time now.

Motion approved.

**Hon. W. Oppal:** I am pleased to introduce Bill 19. This bill would offer an international convention, a process which has been highly effective and highly popular in settling disputes between international investors. It has been adopted in 140 countries, including the United States and all other members of the G8 nations.

The convention, entitled the convention on the settlement of disputes between states and nationals of other states, permits a private dispute resolution process that can be used to resolve international investment disputes between jurisdictions that are signatories to the convention and persons from member jurisdictions. The convention would provide an effective method by which commercial disputes involving investment disputes which British Columbia investors abroad might encounter in any of the countries and are parties to that convention....

I move that the bill be placed on the orders of the day for second reading at the next sitting of this House after today.

[1425]

Bill 19, Settlement of International Investment Disputes Act, introduced, read a first time and ordered to be placed on orders of the day for second reading at the next sitting of the House after today.

#### FINANCE STATUTES AMENDMENT ACT, 2006

Hon. C. Taylor presented a message from Her Honour the Lieutenant-Governor: a bill intituled Finance Statutes Amendment Act, 2006.

**Hon. C. Taylor:** I move the bill be introduced and read a first time now.

Motion approved.

**Hon. C. Taylor:** I am pleased to introduce the Finance Statutes Amendment Act, 2006, which amends Ministry of Finance statutes, most notably the Business Corporations Act.

The changes proposed to the Business Corporations Act will broaden public access to company share registers, and make corrections and technical refinements to

the act and related statutes. The bill also contains minor technical amendments to the Financial Institutions Act, as well as amendments that will update its provisions to apply the new Business Corporations Act rather than the old Company Act to extra-provincial financial institutions.

The Finance Statutes Amendment Act, 2006, will amend the Mutual Fire Insurance Companies Act to reduce unnecessary regulatory burden. This bill will also repeal an obsolete statute, the Pacific North Coast Native Cooperative Act, and make the technical amendments to the Public Sector Employers Act.

Finally, this bill will amend the Real Estate Services Act to streamline the treatment of real estate commissions by brokers and refine matters related to the new Real Estate Compensation Fund.

Mr. Speaker, I move the bill be placed on orders of the day for second reading at the next sitting of the House after today.

Bill 18, Finance Statutes Amendment Act, 2006, introduced, read a first time and ordered to be placed on orders of the day for second reading at the next sitting of the House after today.

#### CHRIST FOR THE NATIONS BIBLE COLLEGE ACT

D. Hayer presented a bill intituled Christ for the Nations Bible College Act.

**D. Hayer:** I move the bill be introduced and now read a first time.

Motion approved.

**D. Hayer:** It is with great pleasure that I act as a sponsor of this bill to create a degree-granting status for the post-secondary institution located in my community of Surrey.

Christ for the Nations was established as a non-profit missionary agency in Canada in 1978 and began offering interdenominational diploma-level programs in 1989. The Christ for the Nations Institute in Dallas, Texas, was the founding school of the Canadian college, which now operates independently of its founders as one of 44 colleges throughout the world.

The Canadian college is located in my community of Surrey and has approximately 75 students and 14 faculty. It presently offers diploma- and certificate-level programs with an emphasis on practical ministry training. A proposed Christ for the Nations Bible College Act is a private bill which, if passed, will continue the Christ for the Nations Bible College and set out its original structure, authority, rights and obligations.

Legal counsel for the proponents has advised that the college is already incorporated under the Society Act and is pursuing a private bill to obtain authority to grant theological degrees in its own name and right, despite sections on degree-granting set out in other legislation. As well, theological colleges find it benefi-

cial to incorporate under the legislation in order to permit their students to qualify for student financial assistance.

This bill has been reviewed by both the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Advanced Education and meets their criteria. I'm supporting this bill, and I ask that all members of the House also support this worthy goal.

I move that the bill be referred to the Select Standing Committee on Parliamentary Reform, Ethical Conduct, Standing Orders and Private Bills.

Bill Pr402, Christ for the Nations Bible College Act, introduced, read a first time and referred to the Select Standing Committee on Parliamentary Reform, Ethical Conduct, Standing Orders and Private Bills.

[1430]

### Statements (Standing Order 25B)

#### MLA'S EXPERIENCE IN HEALTH CARE SYSTEM

**R. Sultan:** As Chair of this Legislature's Health Committee, I seized a recent opportunity to give the system a grassroots test. It passed with flying colours.

Through the dedication of Sergeant-at-Arms Humphreys and his staff, the paramedics of B.C. Ambulance Service — a fine group of people — cardiac specialist Dr. Kinkle, countless nurses, care aides and hospital support workers at Royal Jubilee Hospital, through to my own Dr. Kroll and cardiac home care specialist Nurse Solly.... Through all their combined efforts, they patched me up to live another day.

We've all heard the message about ActNow and five and 20 — the importance of five fruits and vegetables a day and 20 minutes of exercise. But hearing isn't doing. I had to be whacked on the head with the equivalent of a two-by-four to pay attention before I took it to heart — no pun intended. I am sure acting now.

According to the specialists, 25 years ago I would have been a dead man. Now I felt I was ready to go back to work the very next day.

From my first feelings of heartburn during question period....

[Laughter.]

Well, we've all experienced that. You know, I must say I did stand up with some trepidation, knowing immediately what happened last time.

But from question period until I was discharged from the operating room was only 150 minutes. In a situation where minutes count, that is, I think, extraordinary.

So bring on the broccoli and the running shoes; down with television and French fries. It's great to be back. Thank you to the almost 500 members, friends and constituents who were so gracious with their various expressions of support.

#### EDUCATION SYSTEM IN B.C.

**J. Horgan:** It's a pleasure to rise and join with other members today in acknowledging the beginning of Education Week here in British Columbia. As the official opposition Education critic, I've been travelling around the province meeting with students, teachers, parents, trustees, support workers and superintendents. Although we always have more work to do, I have been struck by the commitment and quality of the many individuals and communities across this province that dedicate their time and energy to improving the educational experience of our students. Indeed, these exceptional individuals have contributed to make our public education system the envy of the country — and perhaps the best in the world.

But school is not just about academic achievement. Although we score very well in traditional measurements, the greatest achievement of our school system is the impact on the social and emotional development of our young citizens. We are, of course, producing fine scholars and poets, athletes and musicians, but we are also shaping the character of the future community leaders in our province.

With the Minister of Education, I met Nick Prince today, a father of school-aged children in Vancouver. He recently returned to finish his grade 12 so that he could tell his kids the importance of hard work, sacrifice and perseverance. It's stories like Nick's right across this province that are an inspiration to me and to all of our members in this House.

So I encourage you, members, to take advantage of this week to visit a school in your community, meet some teachers and support workers, go to a basketball game, go to a track meet, take in a play or a school band production and celebrate the accomplishments of our outstanding students. At the same time, I'd like you to celebrate the accomplishments of those students who overcome obstacles every day just to be in the classroom. They, too, are an inspiration to all of us, and I urge you to do that at your earliest opportunity.

#### JOINT-REPLACEMENT SURGERY PILOT PROJECT

**J. Yap:** Keeping with the theme of health care, I rise today to talk about the results of the joint-replacement surgery pilot project that began in Richmond in 2004. The provincial government, Vancouver Coastal Health and Richmond Hospital established this project to reduce wait times for hip and knee replacements. The project has been an outstanding success. It has been so successful that UBC hospital is setting up two operating rooms to duplicate this initiative in Vancouver.

Our government provided \$500,000, and the Richmond Hospital Foundation and Vancouver Coastal Health each contributed \$400,000 to renovate and open a sixth operating room at the hospital.

[1435]

The goal of this project was to use the operating room more efficiently to perform knee- and hip-

replacement surgeries. Standardized equipment, supplies and prostheses were used to achieve a 40-percent increase in the number of joint-replacement surgeries performed. Other improvements: in-patient preparation and post-operation care reduced hospital stays for the surgeries, freeing up beds for other patients.

Finding improvements in joint-replacement surgery is vital to our health care system in British Columbia. The number of seniors in this province is projected to double by 2028, and we will be providing more joint-replacement surgeries than ever before.

I'd like to congratulate Dr. Ken Hughes and Cindy Roberts, who led the project. Their success will profoundly improve the lives of countless British Columbians as more hospitals duplicate their methods. Dr. Jeff Coleman, the chief operating officer of Richmond Health Services, also deserves recognition for his continuing efforts to find innovations to improve the quality of care provided by Richmond Hospital.

This project furthers our government's goal to build the best system of supports for B.C. seniors by improving the mobility, health and quality of life for our seniors.

#### NATURE TRUST OF B.C.

**S. Simpson:** I'm pleased to rise today in the House to ask that the House help to celebrate the 35th anniversary of the incorporation of the Nature Trust of British Columbia. The Nature Trust is British Columbia's oldest and largest non-profit land conservation organization. Its mandate is to protect B.C.'s natural diversity of wildlife and plants in their critical habitat through the acquisition and management of ecologically significant land.

The trust is a non-advocacy group working with landowners, corporations, other conservation organizations, governments and individuals to achieve its conservation objectives. Since 1971 the trust has invested over \$65 million to secure more than 150,000 acres in British Columbia. Of their 120 acquisitions, 11 are now managed as provincial parks. This land is now valued at over \$500 million.

The Nature Trust uses science-based analysis, technology and expertise to purchase land with the highest biodiversity values and land which is at the greatest risk of being lost. They use an innovative approach to accomplish their objectives, including land purchases, conservation covenants and ecological gifts, among others. This is always done in line with their mission statement, which states: "To conserve critical habitats and the naturally occurring plants and animals they nurture as well as other areas of ecological significance and scenic beauty throughout British Columbia."

In addition to their purchases, the trust manages over 229 properties, with the goals of ensuring that the long-term ecological and habitat values for which the land was acquired are achieved. Whether it is through their acquisitions or their youth crew, which gives young people an excellent life and work experience while supporting habitat restoration and cleanups, the

Nature Trust makes a remarkable contribution to British Columbia. I urge all members to join me in congratulating them on their 35th anniversary.

#### VOLUNTEERISM IN LANGLEY

**M. Polak:** On February 3, at a very special dinner, Veronica Volunteer, a.k.a. Pauline Huth, shared her experiences as a lifelong volunteer. Pauline's alter ego Veronica made it up close and personal. Pauline Huth is the executive director at Langley's Meals on Wheels. Her speech at the Langley city volunteer appreciation dinner brought the house down. As she played the role of Veronica Volunteer, every honoured volunteer in the room saw a bit of themselves.

Volunteers from all walks of life give rides, visit the sick and elderly, prepare meals and assist all manner of charitable organizations. They give of themselves, asking nothing in return. Yet according to Veronica Volunteer, it is the best and most satisfying lifestyle one could possibly imagine.

My riding of Langley is rich in the spirit of volunteerism, so much so that appreciation events are a regular feature of the social calendar. In addition to the Langley city volunteer appreciation where Veronica Volunteer made her appearance, two upcoming events will pay tribute to those generous individuals who make our community the welcoming, supportive place that it is. On April 6 the township of Langley will honour its volunteers, and on April 7 the local RCMP detachment will pay tribute to community members who work to enhance the community aspect of policing.

[1440]

Volunteers are the unsung heroes of my community and yours. Their contributions are invaluable. Somehow an award or gala dinner just doesn't seem to suffice to show how much we appreciate the work that they do, so the next time you meet a volunteer, take the time to thank them. Let them know personally how much their work means to you.

#### EMERGENCY RESPONSE IN POWELL RIVER

**N. Simons:** I'm pleased to rise today to inform the House about an incident that took place last month in the early hours of the morning in Powell River. The reason I'm pleased is because most members haven't heard about what happened that morning. The reason they haven't heard about it is because of the dedication, the good training, the hard work and the courage of the men and women of the emergency services in Powell River.

Early on that February morning a propane tank slipped off a trailer as it was being unloaded from a barge in Powell River, shearing off the valve and releasing a cloud of 35,000 litres of liquid propane into the air. Any ignition source would have sent a 20-metre fireball into the air. Everything within a 75-metre radius would have ignited. The driver of the truck, John Veenhof, immediately alerted the Superior Propane manager of the accident.

When he realized there were four refrigeration units running on the barge, he went back down and turned them off. This might have prevented the explosion. On the barge were 60,000 kilograms of gasoline, over 35,000 kilograms of heating oil and close to 30,000 kilograms of toxic chemicals. The manager of Superior Propane, Doug Miller, immediately turned off all sources of ignition in the area and remained on the scene to assist the firefighters, knowing full well the dangers he was in.

Chief Dean Gerhart, the director of fire and emergency services, took charge, immediately identified a 700-metre extreme danger zone, opened an emergency operations centre and ordered evacuation of at least 40 nearby residences. According to Doug Nauer, the municipal emergency coordinator, his professionalism and the manner in which he performed his duties have obviously filtered through his department and were evident in the way all the members of the department handled the situation.

He goes on to state: "I'm of the firm belief that it was only due to the action taken by the responders at the scene that this community did not experience a disaster that would have resulted in a major loss of life."

These firefighters included Captain Duff; firefighters Baker, Jones and Culos; and auxiliary firefighters Arrowsmith, Cleghorn, Fair, Foort, Hodgins, Hretchka, Rob Infanti, Oele and Pamela Iwasiuk.

RCMP members who remained in the danger zone while evacuating houses included constables Nassichuk, Huisman, Racz and Paquette.

I join the officials of the city and region in thanking them for their hard work.

### Oral Questions

#### COPEMAN CLINIC INVESTIGATION

**C. James:** The Health Minister has referred the issue of the Copeman clinic's extra-billing scheme to the Medical Services Commission. Can the minister please tell this House, specifically, what he has sent to the Medical Services Commission in regard to his concerns regarding extra billing, and will he make any of those materials public?

**Hon. G. Abbott:** We have asked the Medical Services Commission to look into this issue because under the Medicare Protection Act, they are the appropriate body to which to refer such matters. We have asked them, in particular, to look at whether the operations, the business model, at the Copeman centre are in accord with the federal and provincial statutory framework which guide us in this province.

**Mr. Speaker:** Leader of the Opposition has a supplemental.

**C. James:** I think the public really wants to know not only the minister's view but, in fact, this govern-

ment's view around the concern that has been taken to the Medical Services Commission. Those concerns, as we know, actually led to a legal opinion in Ontario that said that Mr. Copeman's scheme did in fact violate the Canada Health Act. This is a very serious issue.

If the Medical Services Commission rules in favour of Mr. Copeman's extra-billing scheme, it could in fact provide a how-to manual for other doctors when it comes to extra billing. My question is to the minister. Has the government sought a legal opinion on this issue, and will he make that legal opinion public as part of his submission to the medical commission?

**Hon. G. Abbott:** Just so the record is clear, the Leader of the Opposition referenced an Ontario legal opinion. I hope she will clarify for the House that that is not an opinion from the government of Ontario. It is in fact, as I understand it, a legal opinion from a private party or a private organization in Ontario. I don't believe the government of Ontario is any more in the habit of releasing its opinions than the government of British Columbia is.

[1445]

The issue is an important one, and we have secured advice from a range of sources as we have moved forward with the important issue with Mr. Copeman. We have been in discussion for some months, as the Leader of the Opposition well knows, with Mr. Copeman to try to fully understand the business model that guides his new clinic and to determine whether that clinic is within or outside of the bounds of the Canada Health Act and the Medicare Protection Act.

**Mr. Speaker:** The Leader of the Opposition has a further supplemental.

**C. James:** In fact, there is a difference between British Columbia and Ontario, and the difference is that the Ontario government has spoken out loud and clear and said no to Mr. Copeman and no to extra-billing.

The commission's decision on this issue could affect every family in British Columbia and could determine whether or not patients pay extra fees to see their family doctor. Mr. Copeman has said that he intends to make his argument to the commission defending his scheme that charges extra fees just to see a doctor.

This is a very simple question to the Minister of Health. What legal representation does the minister intend to take to the commission to defend public interest in this case?

**Hon. G. Abbott:** The Medical Services Commission performs its work independently. I understand that without any presumptions one way or another, they will pursue this matter objectively and professionally to determine the best advice that they might provide to me as minister or to undertake whatever action they deem appropriate under the terms of their act. But the commission is independent.

Again, I don't believe that anything is served by the kind of rhetoric which appears to be embodied in the

Leader of the Opposition's question. Again, it's hard to believe, given that some 28 private clinics opened up under the NDP back in the 1990s, that they should be coming forward with such sanctimonious rhetoric.

#### PUBLIC ACCESS TO MEDICAL SERVICES COMMISSION

**D. Cubberley:** You, know, I find it interesting that the minister continues to wilfully confuse the issue of private clinics with the issue of user fees. I don't believe that we on this side and the public are taken in by that.

After nine and a half months, the minister asked the Medical Services Commission to make a decision that will affect every family in British Columbia — whether doctors will continue to be prohibited from charging patients money for access to their services. This decision has a potential to determine whether public health care remains universal or not. A lot is riding on it, so it's essential that there be an open process.

Can the minister assure the House that the Medical Services Commission remains a public body and that he will ensure it follows an open process so that concerned members of the public can have access to the commission to present their opinions?

**Hon. G. Abbott:** I don't know whether the model that the member opposite has in mind is Perry Mason or some broader opportunity. The Medical Services Commission acts as the Medical Services Commission acts under the mandate that's accorded to it in the Medicare Protection Act. The powers of the commission are laid out very clearly in a number of sections, particularly sections 15 and 37. They will operate exactly as they should operate. They will be undertaking some fact-finding in respect of the Copeman clinic. They will be looking very closely at its business model, at how it is represented in its website and how it's represented in other promotional materials.

[1450]

Again, as we've said from the start, the concern here is: do the fees that are put forward by the Copeman clinic represent barriers to access under the terms of the Medicare Protection Act provincially and the Canada Health Act federally? That is what the commission will determine.

**Mr. Speaker:** Member for Saanich South has a supplemental.

**D. Cubberley:** Well, you know, the minister didn't actually respond to the question: is it a public body, and will it be open to the public?

The members opposite thought it was an important question when they were in opposition. They brought exactly that question to the government of the day. In fact, the Minister of Economic Development, then the Health critic, noted: "One of the groups that does not feel they're represented at the table in terms of the Medical Services Commission is probably the group

that has the most at stake, and that's the public." He said it was a matter of "grave concern" to the public how their health care dollars would be spent. He was right. He asked the minister of the day for just the kind of assurances we're seeking — that the meetings would be open. She said: "The advice that we have from the Attorney General...is that there is no reason to, and we don't actually have a right to, hold those meetings 'in secret' or 'in private.'"

So the question is: now you're the government, will the minister agree that the Medical Services Commission meetings continue to be open to the public and that persons other than Mr. Copeman will have the opportunity to present arguments to the commission on issues affecting the future of public health care?

Interjection.

**Mr. Speaker:** Member.

**Hon. G. Abbott:** The Medical Services Commission does not operate at my discretion or at my direction. The Medical Services Commission is an independent body that will act appropriately, given their statutory framework. If the members opposite wish to make a submission to the Medical Services Commission, they should contact the commission and see if that is possible. I don't determine whether that's possible or not.

It's interesting that ever since the controversy around the Copeman clinic first emerged, the members opposite — particularly the Health critic and the Leader of the Opposition — have been saying over and over again: "Oh, just shut it down; just shut it down." Now, when we're going to the appropriate body, the Medical Services Commission, somehow that process is flawed as well.

It makes me recall the words of one of their former colleagues, a former NDP Minister of Forests, who said: "Government can do anything it wants." Clearly, that's the way they think these things should operate. But we believe it has to be fair, it has to be objective, it has to be professional and it has to be comprehensive, and it has to be the right thing for the province of British Columbia.

**J. Kwan:** A simple question for the minister — no rhetoric: are the meetings and deliberations of the Medical Services Commission held in public?

**Hon. G. Abbott:** The member should refer to the act if she wishes to find out the answer to that question.

**Mr. Speaker:** Member for Vancouver–Mount Pleasant has a supplemental.

**J. Kwan:** You know what? I'm actually going to refer to the former Minister of Health, who was in opposition and who's now the current Minister of Economic Development. When he asked the question of former minister Penny Priddy if the meetings and deliberations of the Medical Services Commission were

public, the minister then said yes — that they were. The former Minister of Health said, on record, that it is crucial that the public have access to that information.

We're now talking about user fees that impact potentially every single British Columbian. This government is accountable to that question, and I will give the minister another opportunity to answer the question that his own former minister put to the government then: are meetings and deliberations of the Medical Services Commission public? Does he deem that information important enough that those meetings are actually held in public so the public can access the information and deliberations of the Medical Services Commission?

[1455]

**Hon. G. Abbott:** This is a fascinating exercise in civics that we're undertaking here today, for sure. The powers of the Medical Services Commission were actually defined by the former NDP government back in the 1990s. That's when the commission was created, in statute, under the Medicare Protection Act.

When one has issues like the Copeman clinic, that is where, under the legislation that was passed by this former government, one goes to get answers to those questions. There are a number of provisions in the Medicare Protection Act, notably sections 15 and 37, that define the scope and authority of the commission in determining these things. It is entirely the right place for these questions to be resolved.

I think every citizen of British Columbia, save possibly the few across the way here, certainly deserves to get answers that are unbiased, that are objective and that are independent. That is precisely why we have put this matter to the Medical Services Commission.

#### FOOD SERVICES IN MAPLE RIDGE HEALTH CARE FACILITIES

**M. Sather:** Last week the Minister of Health said that one of the issues in the debate around rethermalized food in hospitals, health care facilities and long-term care facilities had to do with tastiness. I have a question for the minister. Will the minister commit to eating retherm food from Ridge Meadows Hospital every day until his audit is complete, and will he report back to this House on how tasty it was?

**Hon. G. Abbott:** My goodness. The well is getting fairly dry, I'd say. I know these 30-minute question periods do wear down the number of available questions that one can advance to government ministers.

But you know, I have actually eaten rethermalized food at a hospital facility. It wasn't Hy's; it wasn't Bishop's. But it wasn't bad either. It was pretty good.

I asked the member the question the other day. He didn't get a chance to answer because he was on a supplemental, so I'll ask him first time round here. Is he willing to commit on behalf of this pretend government across the way that should they ever be elected in the future, they will ban rethermalized food?

I'd be fascinated to know that, particularly given that in 1995 it was the folks across the way that were the authors, the pioneers of food rethermalization in this province — 1995, Lions Bay hospital. Are you going to ban it in the future? Let me know.

Interjections.

**Mr. Speaker:** Members. Members. The member for Maple Ridge-Pitt Meadows has the floor.

**M. Sather:** Well, it's unfortunate that the minister takes this cavalier attitude towards a very important issue to the residents in my constituency.

Two of the other factors that the minister mentioned last week around this issue had to do with nutritional content of the food and food safety. Now, the nutritional audit that the minister is planning is going to take two years, but surely if the minister were to eat this rethermalized food every day, as the residents of the Ridge Meadows Hospital long-term care facilities have to do, the audit would be unnecessary.

On the question of food safety: does the minister have any information whatsoever that the food at Ridge Meadows Hospital was unsafe before the rethermalized system was put into place?

**Hon. G. Abbott:** I'm still waiting for an answer to my question of whether the....

**Mr. Speaker:** Minister, you're not asking the questions. You're answering them.

Interjections.

**Mr. Speaker:** Members.

[1500]

**Hon. G. Abbott:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I understood this was question period, not answer period.

However, let me frame my answer in this constructive way. There is no reason to fear food safety prior to rethermalization.

I'm sure that in 1995 when the NDP first brought rethermalized food into the hospital system, they didn't do it because of safety issues. I'm sure they did it for other reasons. I know that Fraser Health Authority has been working diligently to see the quality, tastiness, safety and reliability of foods constantly improved at facilities throughout the Fraser Health Authority. I do look forward to that commitment on the part of the opposition in respect of getting rid of rethermalization.

#### MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES ON SUNSHINE COAST

**N. Simons:** My question is for the Minister of Health. The six-bed psychiatric unit at St. Mary's Hospital in Sechelt is the only facility for patients with acute mental illness on the Sunshine Coast. Last month it was closed without any warning, sending patients to

the general ward and others literally out into the street. Can the minister please inform the House when this government will provide the adequate resources and encouragement to get that unit open again?

**Hon. G. Abbott:** This government invests well over \$1 billion a year every year on mental health and addictions issues. It is one of the most important things that we do, as a Ministry of Health and as a government, to ensure that in fact there is the capital investment and capital reinvestment in mental health facilities around the province. I appreciate the member bringing forward this issue, and I would be pleased to follow up and provide him with further information in respect of that particular facility and the programs it offers.

**Mr. Speaker:** The member for Powell River-Sunshine Coast has a supplemental.

**N. Simons:** There seems to be a disconnect between the statements that the minister is making and the reality on the ground. Unfortunately, I'm hearing very disturbing stories from constituents. On the day of the closure of this particular facility, one was given a cheque to stay in a local hostel. One was recommended to go to the transition house. Another, after that situation arose, is now living homeless on the streets of Vancouver. In both cases, primary caregivers learned of the unit's closure when the patients called them.

Can the Minister of Health please explain how sending psychiatric patients to a hostel or to a day-surgery waiting room for a week constitutes health care when and where people need it?

**Hon. G. Abbott:** I understand that Vancouver Coastal Health Authority is working very hard to try to get that unit reopened, and it will be reopening as soon as possible. If the member is looking for a disconnect, however, what he should look at is the disconnect between the NDP's mental health plan of 1998, which was a cost of \$125 million, which the minister of the day, Penny Priddy, admitted not one cent was funded for....

We've reversed that. We are now providing over \$1 billion annually for mental health and addictions issues. It is a very important investment by this government. Not only do we walk the walk; we talk the talk as well.

#### SECURITY OF ACCENTURE AND B.C. HYDRO EMPLOYEE INFORMATION

**G. Gentner:** We have learned of a serious information breach at foreign-owned Accenture that affects over 4,200 employees of B.C. Hydro and 1,500 at Accenture itself. Employees' names, numbers and salary and bank account information have been compromised. These employees must now consider monitoring their accounts for irregular debit activity, contacting appropriate credit agencies to advise of the breach,

changing account numbers and changing PIN numbers.

Can the minister responsible for B.C. Hydro confirm that Accenture knew of this breach of security early last week — Monday or Tuesday? Why did it take Accenture until Thursday evening to notify B.C. Hydro and until Friday, March 24, to notify its employees?

[1505]

**Hon. R. Neufeld:** This government takes seriously, and I take seriously, any breach of information — or privacy information actually getting into the wrong hands. This issue came to me on Friday morning. The Crown had already acted on it in letting people know that something had happened.

We should make it clear here. Someone broke into an office of Accenture Business Services and actually cut a chain holding a computer and stole that computer. That's a criminal act, and I'm not going to comment on days or time or who.

Right now the RCMP are fully investigating what took place, what happened. When they finish their investigation — I don't want to compromise it in any way — they will let us know what took place.

**Mr. Speaker:** The member for Delta North has a supplemental.

**G. Gentner:** Maybe the minister doesn't want to compromise the situation, but the integrity of many of the employees has already been compromised.

The CEO of Hydro has appealed with cap in hand to Accenture to provide a review of this incident. Can the minister ask the Privacy Commissioner whether or not he has the authority to review a security breach of a private company which is in control of B.C. Hydro's employee and customer information?

**Hon. R. Neufeld:** I'm happy to tell the member that, actually, the Freedom of Information and Privacy Act applies to Accenture Business Services — to those services that are provided to the Crown, B.C. Hydro and B.C. Transmission Corp.

#### ACCESS TO B.C. FERRIES INFORMATION

**D. Chudnovsky:** Will the Minister of Transportation commit today to putting B.C. Ferries back under freedom-of-information legislation?

**Hon. K. Falcon:** As I mentioned last week to this House, we need to remind the members opposite why, in fact, B.C. Ferries was made to be an independent company. Why did we do that? We did that because, following the fast ferries fiasco, there were recommendations made, including by the Auditor General.

I might quote from the Auditor General for the member, because apparently my comments last week weren't compelling enough. The Auditor General, as a result of one of three reviews that were done following



the fast ferries fiasco, said — pages 51 to 52 for that member, who may not have read the report: "...the province amend the B.C. Ferries enabling legislation to vest its powers in" — a truly accountable — "independent board of directors with responsibility for governing, exempt from political and bureaucratic interference."

That's exactly what we did. We did it to ensure that politicians and governments don't have the ability to interfere with the operations of B.C. Ferries.

**Mr. Speaker:** The member for Vancouver-Kensington has a supplemental.

**D. Chudnovsky:** It's interesting that the minister would talk about political interference.

Interjection.

**Mr. Speaker:** Member.  
Continue.

**D. Chudnovsky:** It's interesting that the minister would refer to political interference, because last Thursday in this House this Minister of Transportation talked about instructions that were given by this government to B.C. Ferries regarding three ships in the northern fleet. We don't call that political interference. But without freedom-of-information legislation in place, the people of B.C. have no way of determining what the instructions that this minister talked about were and what impact they had and have on safety.

My question to the Minister of Transportation: will the minister commit today to putting B.C. Ferries back under freedom-of-information legislation? Or will he table in this House any instructions, advice, requirements or other correspondence between the government and B.C. Ferries as regards safety and maintenance?

**Hon. K. Falcon:** I think the member is confusing some things here. Actually, we set out, in the Coastal Ferry Act in 2003, on April 1, clear direction that B.C. Ferries was to replace the northern vessels within a ten-year period. That was written into the contract that B.C. Ferries is required to uphold. It's not interfering. It's just providing initial direction in the initial contract that provides the terms of reference under which they're to operate.

[1510]

In terms of freedom of information, the member is concerned about safety apparently. The member should know that B.C. Ferries is no different than our airlines. It's no different than the railways. If the member wishes to access freedom-of-information requests through Transport Canada or through the Transportation Safety Board, the member is free to do that. I can tell you that all those reports will be made available, any that are not public. The member can certainly access the federal freedom-of-information act.

But let's not forget the accountabilities that were built into place here — an independent ferries commissioner. We've got an independent board with representatives of small communities and labour and others that sit on that board. We've got audited financial statements. We've got an annual general meeting. There's lots of accountability at B.C. Ferries.

**M. Farnworth:** There is \$127 million worth of taxpayers' money going into B.C. Ferries. FOI is about accountability. It's not about interference. Can the minister tell us: if FOI is good enough for Accenture — as was just stated by the Minister of Energy, Mines and Petroleum — why isn't it good enough for B.C. Ferries and the taxpayers of British Columbia?

**Hon. K. Falcon:** Well, I appreciate the member's passion. It's unfortunate they didn't show that same passion during the fast ferries fiasco.

You know, when I hear these questions, I'm left asking this question, which I hate to have to ask: have the members actually read the Auditor General's report? Have the members taken the time to read the reports that flowed out of the fast ferries? They were very clear, and they all had a common theme. The common theme was: you must make sure that this corporation is independent from political interference. Now, if the member wants to FOI safety records...

Interjections.

**Mr. Speaker:** Members.

**Hon. K. Falcon:** ...they have the ability to....

**Mr. Speaker:** Minister.  
Members, we want to hear the answer.  
Minister, continue.

**Hon. K. Falcon:** You know, it's no different than the airlines. It's no different than railways. They're overseen and regulated by Transport Canada and the Transportation Safety Board. You can access that through the federal freedom-of-information act if you have any concerns, but I will tell you this. Today I can stand before this House and say there's a heck of a lot more accountability with B.C. Ferries than there ever was when it was a Crown corporation under that....

Interjection.

**Hon. K. Falcon:** Sorry, the member opposite is getting excited there.

**Mr. Speaker:** Member, would you withdraw that.

**Hon. K. Falcon:** Let's just remember....

**Mr. Speaker:** Minister.

**H. Lali:** Withdraw.

**Mr. Speaker:** Continue, minister.

**Hon. K. Falcon:** Let's just remember that the NDP opposition in government had a different form of accountability. When the board of B.C. Ferries questioned the lack of business plan on the fast ferries fiasco, they fired the board, put in a new board headed by Jack Munro, went down that road, and it was a disaster.

[End of question period.]

### Orders of the Day

**Hon. M. de Jong:** I call Committee of Supply. For the information of members, in Committee A we'll be discussing the estimates for the Ministry of Education, and in this chamber, continued debate on the Ministry of Employment and Income Assistance.

[1515]

### Committee of Supply

#### ESTIMATES: MINISTRY OF EMPLOYMENT AND INCOME ASSISTANCE (continued)

The House in Committee of Supply (Section B); S. Hammell in the chair.

The committee met at 3:17 p.m.

On Vote 25: ministry operations, \$1,369,415,000 (continued).

**C. Trevena:** Welcome back, minister. I'd like to carry on where we left off at the end of last week on Thursday evening, talking about access to assistance.

I know that the ministry made a big push this spring to get people on to direct debit. In fact, the push wraps up in a couple of days, as I understand. I don't want to talk about the rationale for this, because I've heard from some people it's good and from some people it's bad. I just wanted to know a bit more about the promotion itself. How much did the promotion cost?

**Hon. C. Richmond:** The ministry has allocated about \$300,000 for this initiative. The actual cost will be determined based on the number of clients who sign up. I think I should add that this, although it may not always take the form of an active promotion, will be something we'll be encouraging our clients to do on an ongoing basis.

**C. Trevena:** Part of the promotion was the provision of socks, T-shirts or a travel mug and a canvas bag. Is that \$300,000 the cost of those items?

**Hon. C. Richmond:** Yeah, pretty much. That's the cost of providing the incentives for people. I should add, too, that although some fun has been made of offering socks, when we consulted with the advocacy

groups and the people who minister to a lot of these people on a daily basis, it was the number-one item that came to mind — that they could always use some socks. So the deputy and the people in the ministry put together a package of five pairs of socks. For most people, they were greatly appreciated.

To date, I should add, the clients' responses have been very positive. In fact, I just want to share a couple of recent and unsolicited comments made by our front-line staff.

[1520]

One staff member indicated:

I have placed several calls this morning to let folks know that their incentive was waiting for them at the office, if they'd like to come down and pick it up. Five clients have been in, and of those that I called, every one of them was very grateful, including a woman who was also nearly in tears. She came back up to the counter again to say a heartfelt thank you and wanted to mention as well that it is her birthday tomorrow and how she thought it was such a wonderful gift. Another shared that they felt compelled to give feedback about the sock and T-shirt incentive.

I have watched today a number of clients receiving this gift and note their responses are very positive — absolutely no negative reactions, and a few, particularly older single men, looked as though they might cry. Sometimes when we are fortunate, we forget the positive impact just a small initiative like this makes those in need feel.

**C. Trevena:** Obviously, the promotion hasn't finished yet. I just wanted to know if you had figures on how many socks, mugs, T-shirts and so on have been actually distributed.

**Hon. C. Richmond:** We don't have any stats for you yet, but this Wednesday is cheque-issue day. About a week or ten days after that, we should know the results up to date. As soon as they're known, we'll let everybody know.

**C. Trevena:** I look forward to that. A couple more questions about this. I know that there.... Well, as you know, I was in the Kamloops phone centre, and they had some of the promotional materials there in the phone centre ready to hand out for when people did apply for direct debit.

It did seem at that stage there were large volumes of mugs and socks still available. This was about ten days ago, so I would be very interested to find out. I would like to know.... You said it's about \$300,000. So does that mean that if you don't distribute all the mugs and socks, you get the money back? Is it a sale or return type of setup?

**Hon. C. Richmond:** We put enough into each office to accommodate the number of people who are not on direct deposit. To repeat what I said earlier, there is no finite cut-off date for this program. We are going to continue to encourage people to take up the idea of electronic deposit.

Just to repeat for those who have just tuned in: we have about 70 percent of our clients now on direct deposit. We would like to see that number increase significantly, just to allow the people who are most vulnerable to retain more of their income assistance. Too many of them now fall prey to those who are predators and prey on them — the drug pushers, etc., and unscrupulous landlords — and we want to do everything possible to keep money out of the hands of those people and leave it in the hands of our clients. Direct deposit, we feel, is one of the best ways of doing that.

Another way is that we're working with the team in Vancouver, including the police, to make sure that people living in these SROs in the downtown east side are actually living in those places and that their cheque is going to provide shelter, rather than going to some unscrupulous person who takes the money, gives them a few dollars' worth of drugs for it, and then they don't have a place to live.

**C. Trevena:** I'll be picking up on accommodation issues as we go through, but I would like to continue on this promotion — not direct deposit, but the promotion. You state in official.... When it was announced, it was going to be just until March 29. That's why I was surprised you were going to carry out handing out the goodies after that.

[1525]

I noticed that in the information that went to staff about this, the materials were going to be shipped to ministry offices, to government agents and also to trusted third parties. What would a trusted third party be in this scenario?

**Hon. C. Richmond:** We did send some materials to government agents. The trusted third parties are people who work with these people and who do administer their cheques. I don't have a list of names for you right at hand, but I can probably dig that out for you. But they're people who we have contracts with who do administer cheques for people. There are lots of other trusted third parties. The Salvation Army comes to mind as one.

But I also don't think the member should get hung up on the fact that we were going to run the program till the end of March. We still have supplies left. We did put a date in there to urge people to get in before the end of the year or to get in as quickly as possible and get their funds transferred. As long as we have supplies of these items, we'll continue pushing the program.

**C. Trevena:** I hope I'm not belabouring this, but these supplies — the socks and the T-shirts and the travel mugs — are there for people who sign up for direct deposit. They are there as a benefit directly for making that move from getting your cheque monthly to getting your cheque monthly transferred to your bank account. So I wonder why the Salvation Army would have these supplies, because they don't issue

cheques, nor do they sign people up for government benefits.

**Hon. C. Richmond:** I assume the member is referring to trusted third parties. We have one in Clearwater in the North Thompson. The Salvation Army will issue cheques on our behalf in a community in which they're located, and I would certainly look on them as a trusted third party. I don't know if that answers the question, as I understand it.

[1530]

**C. Trevena:** How much does it cost to issue and distribute the cheques in the regular way, and how much did it cost to do it by electronic transfer?

**Hon. C. Richmond:** We don't have an exact cost of what it costs to administer each cheque, but the electronic deposit is a fraction of what it would cost to administer it personally — print a cheque and hand it out — which we do in so many cases now. The other thing is that it's done by the provincial treasury. Like I say, it's a fraction of the cost, but it's far more secure.

We recently came across a scam being operated in Burnaby where people are using identity tools to print up cards. Let me back up a little bit. They find out who is getting cheques in the mail. The cheques were being stolen out of the mailboxes before the recipient could get to them. These people had the apparatus for making identity cards. They would then make a card that fit that particular cheque and go down and cash the cheque. So we want to put a stop to that, and one way to do that is with electronic transfer of funds.

**C. Trevena:** I'm very surprised you don't actually have the cost of how much it costs to issue cheques manually or how much the cost is for direct deposit, to do it electronically. I would like those figures, if those can be found.

**Hon. C. Richmond:** To be quite honest, we don't have a number to issue each cheque manually. We simply don't have that number. But we know that it's just a fraction of the cost of having the provincial treasury issue the cheques. There is just no comparison, and it eliminates a lot of the possibility of theft, and it takes away from the workload of the person that has to sit there at that front counter on cheque-issue day.

I've watched them file through the cheques to pick out a cheque and hand it to somebody. Once the cheque is handed to that person, then you have no idea where it's going to end up. We know where a lot of it's going to end up, but it's much more secure if we can get it into a bank account for them. We will give them an ID. A lot of people don't have identification. We'll make sure that they have identification, and then they can go to an automatic teller machine and take out enough cash to see them through the day or the next few days. But it does take it out of their hands and away from a lot of these predators who prey on them every month.

**C. Trevena:** You know that it's going to save money, but you don't know how much money it's going to save. Will the ministry have those savings to use, or will they be going into general revenues — however much this vague saving is?

**Hon. C. Richmond:** Any money that we can save through efficiencies will go back into serving our clients.

**C. Trevena:** What will you be spending this money on? Would it, perhaps, be — as we've discussed before — possibly looking at an increase in rates?

**Hon. C. Richmond:** To be absolutely technical, that question pertains to future government policy and is therefore out of order. But who would know at this time precisely what you're going to spend this money on? We will spend it where it's needed.

[1535]

**C. Trevena:** Minister, we are discussing the budget here, and this was a promotion that came under the 2005-2006 budget, at which point there must have been someone in the department looking at how much the promotion was going to cost, what the cost benefits were going to be — not the psychological or any other benefits, but the cost benefits to the ministry — projecting how many people are going to go on direct debit and looking at how much money that would then free up for use in other programs.

I don't think we're talking about future policy. I think we're talking about, literally, money that was saved in this process that can be used for, as you say, other services. I just wanted to know what use you have budgeted that money for.

**The Chair:** Excuse me, minister. Just a second, please.

Member, there is a subtle difference between directly addressing the minister and going through the Chair. So would you please kindly direct your questions through the Chair.

**Hon. C. Richmond:** The savings by going through there are a secondary benefit to this program. I think we lose the focus, or people over there or others seem to lose the focus of this program and what it's for. It's for the protection of our clients — the most vulnerable of our clients. That was the impetus behind this program. It was not to save money.

Yes, we will save some money. It will not be a large amount, and I can't tell you right now exactly what we will use it for, but we'll use it for the good of our clients.

**C. Trevena:** Thank you, Madam Chair. I apologize for not using the right approach.

So if I might ask the minister: on the figures that are there in the service plan that we have, the figures of the ministry.... In these figures we have executive and

support service. The budget has shrunk from \$168.6 million down to \$21.4 million. I wondered why this change has been made.

**Hon. C. Richmond:** I will see if I can get this straight; it gets quite technical.

The salary and benefits, travel, professional services, office and business expenses, information systems, amortization and building occupancy charges were allocated to fully reflect the cost of providing service by the core business area. This increases accountability for results by more accurately and completely reporting costs by core business area.

The change provides for better budget transparency and accountability and brings the ministry in line with the standard approach of other ministries. So the service plan this year reflects the new way we have restated the executive and support services budget.

[1540]

The next question would be: why did the executive and support services budget increase? It increased by \$400,000 due to an increase in the employee benefits rate from 24 percent to 25.6 percent, and increases in the CAS, BCBC and legal fees allocation.

**C. Trevena:** Basically, the money's just been redistributed into different program areas. Is that what we're saying?

**Hon. C. Richmond:** That's correct.

**C. Trevena:** This, then, means that we have a lump sum going to different programs, but no breakdown for how much is being spent on programming and how much is being paid in transport, salaries and so on, which we used to be able to see. Since that information isn't in the service plan, I wondered whether the minister would be able to tell me how much was spent on executive and support services last year and how much is going to be spent in the subsequent three years.

**Hon. C. Richmond:** I've got two pages of numbers here on ministry operations — employment programs, temporary assistance, disability and supplementary assistance, employment and assistance tribunal appeal, executive and support services, minister's office, corporate services — and it's all here in the supplement to the estimates, fiscal year ending March 31, 2007.

**C. Trevena:** To the minister: I thank him for that. I'll double-check those figures, have a look at them and, if I have any further queries, come back to him on that.

Moving on to one of the areas where obviously it is one of the prime areas of concern for the ministry, I wanted to talk a bit about the job programs. I know that the ministry is changing its approach on employment programs. But first, one of the figure questions. I see in the figures the money going into employment programs remains static from 2006 right through to 2009 at \$93 million. I wondered why it's just a static figure there.

**Hon. C. Richmond:** As nearly as I can grasp the question, it's: why has the employment program budget remained static, or is it going to remain static for the next three years?

I guess the best way I can answer is that the expected-to-work caseload has dropped by over 70,000 cases, and the persons-with-disabilities caseload has increased by over 16,000 cases since June 2001, so the makeup of our caseload is quite different than it was four years ago. Recognizing the shift in caseload composition, the ministry has refocused the employment programs. Base funding for employment programs for the employables has been slightly reduced to reflect the decreased caseload. In 2005-2006 employment programs received a one-time lift to restructure the programs.

[1545]

A new employment program, the B.C. employment program, which better focuses on the needs of our smaller employable caseload, will begin in '06-07. Funding for employment programs for persons with disabilities has increased by \$1.2 million to \$20.5 million. Funding for the community assistance program, focusing on individuals with multiple barriers, is being sustained at \$7.5 million.

I guess the reason that we have shifted, as I said, is because our client makeup caseload has changed dramatically. But to answer why it's static over the next three years, I imagine it's because we project that the numbers now are not likely to change very much over the next three years.

**C. Trevena:** I'd like to talk a little bit about numbers and access to the system for a while, but if I can just focus on the various job programs and the changes that are coming in the pipe over the coming months.

I know that with the present job training programs.... I've been talking to a number of people about this, and there is a concern that people are being directed to jobs and job training programs that really aren't suitable for them, that are there.... They get the sense that they're just being pushed through to reduce caseload numbers, that the job training isn't suitable, that the jobs at the end aren't suitable.

If I can just give you some examples. There are some who have been pushed towards the private colleges rather than public colleges, some who then have to get a student loan, even though they're on income assistance. The screening process for those who are going through this process really isn't rigorous enough. There are people who just haven't got the life skills, haven't got the ability to take on some of these responsibilities — that they are being pushed through by these job training programs.

So I wanted to know whether this is something that is going to be addressed in the reshaping of the job training programs.

**Hon. C. Richmond:** An awful lot of things were taken into consideration when we set about to revamp the B.C. employment program. This was done in con-

sultation with our service providers and our staff — many hours of consultative meetings. We listened to what they had to say, and they told us that some of the programs that were in effect — and maybe those are the programs that the member is speaking of — were just not suitable for people. So with the new B.C. employment program, which goes into effect about July 1.... In fact, the request for proposals is out now. It closes this Wednesday. So in the next month, month and a half — April, May — we'll be evaluating those proposals and awarding contracts to our service providers.

[1550]

One of the things that is in the new B.C. employment program is the ability to tailor a program more to the individual's needs than in the past. We are working with a different caseload. We're working with people who are more difficult to place in employment. In fact, to put it another way, most of the easy ones are gone, and we're down to more.... Every person now requires more individual attention and will require different types of programs than we had in the past. This is why the change.

The information for the redesign, as I have said, was done in consultation with the stakeholders and staff, best practices from other jurisdictions, a comprehensive evaluation of the job placement and Training for Jobs programs — those two programs will now be rolled into one; instead of two different streams, there will be one — and by really examining the ministry data and caseload forecast. I'm sure that all concerned will find that the new B.C. employment program will be much better suited to tailoring courses for individuals than has been the case in the past.

**C. Trevena:** You mentioned that devising these new programs was done in consultation with other jurisdictions. Which other jurisdictions did you talk to?

**Hon. C. Richmond:** The information you requested, I am told, was listed in the RFP, the request for proposal, but we don't happen to have it with us. I'd be happy to get it for you and bring it back or mail it to you or whatever.

**C. Trevena:** I would very much like that information to see what other provinces are doing and how the ministry has been influenced by this.

You also say that you're going to be doing a comprehensive evaluation of the programs that are wrapping up at this moment. If I might ask: who will be carrying out this evaluation, and what will you be looking at?

**Hon. C. Richmond:** Yes, an evaluation of the job placement program and training for jobs program was conducted by the Victoria Consulting Network — Peter Adams — and was submitted to the ministry in August of 2005. The evaluation was commissioned in September 2002 by the ministry to determine if the JP and TFJ programs moved clients into sustainable employment quicker than if they had not participated and to pro-

vide advice on developing future employment programs.

The evaluation reported a number of successes, including the fact that the two programs assisted, at that time, over 30,000 clients to become independent from income assistance. Since the report was completed, this number has increased to over 45,000. The evaluation also showed that these programs benefited clients ready to work and those who required short-term skills training.

The evaluation suggested a few areas for improvement, particularly in the areas of program administration and the need for more flexible client service delivery, which I just mentioned. The ministry is adopting a number of improvements in the area of service delivery and reduction of the administrative workload, also in order to more effectively meet the client's needs in a caseload that has shifted over the past several years.

The ministry is moving to services delivered on an individualized basis. The ministry is developing its newest employment program, the B.C. employment program, which will be implemented in July 2006. Most of the evaluation's recommendations have been incorporated into the BCEP program design.

[1555]

Besides the recommendations from the evaluation, the ministry has used a variety of other sources to guide the development of the B.C. employment program. This includes consultation with stakeholders and ministry staff, best practices from other jurisdictions and ministry data and caseload forecasts.

**C. Trevena:** This was a report that was done some time ago. I remember when it came out. It was delayed in its publication for some time.

I wondered if there was going to be a sort of end-of-program wrap-up — let's look at where we went right, where we went wrong — or whether you feel that that report, which was done some time ago, is enough to answer the many questions about these employment programs.

**Hon. C. Richmond:** We've already done that. All that I just outlined was done before we issued the request for proposal for the new B.C. employment program.

**C. Trevena:** I thank the minister for that clarification.

Before I carry on with specific job training programs and how they're going to be developed over the coming months, I have a question. The minister has been talking about caseload forecasts as one of the ways of developing the programs. I wondered how the ministry assesses cases, how it takes in figures that are people who are coming to the ministry and asking for assistance, how it does this sort of forecasting and whether the ministry is actually keeping a record of everybody who comes to the ministry and is looking for assistance.

**Hon. C. Richmond:** The forecast model generates a baseline forecast of the B.C. employment and assistance

caseload for up to five fiscal years into the future. The model generates the monthly caseload forecast by predicting how the caseload will change from the previous month. The five components analyzed are new out-of-province starting cases; new in-province starting cases; returning cases; stopping cases; and transferring cases — cases moving within the BCEA caseload. The module relies on a series of ordinary least squares — OLS; that's a new one on me — regression models to predict how each of the five components will change over time.

The current forecast model consists of hundreds of separate regressions, representing four programs and five family types, plus CIHR — child in the home of a relative — single men and single women. The forecast model is updated every month. The full budget caseload forecast is done as late as possible in order to obtain the most precision.

The model predicts that a 1-percent change in the unemployment rate will result in an approximate caseload change of 1,200 cases.

[1600]

**C. Trevena:** The statistic... I think this is something that we talked about in our last estimates debate, and I just wanted to find out if things have changed, I guess. Whether the ministry is predicting its caseload by looking at everybody who is coming to the ministry — everyone who comes and picks up that 1-800 number and starts a request or people who come to the door, if they can come to the door, or who complete the Internet access, the people who are making that contact with the ministry... I wondered if this is part of the caseload prediction.

**Hon. C. Richmond:** We have preapplications, which give us a sense of what's coming. We can see how the trend goes in preapplications, but the five components I mentioned are what we use, basically, to base our forecasting on. Those are out-of-province; new in-province starting cases; returning cases; stopping cases; and transferring cases — cases moving within the BCEA caseload.

I should add that there are some people who get as far as the preapplication process, and that's as far as we ever see them. They either find a job, or they move or something, but we don't see them show up on our caseload.

**C. Trevena:** I'll come back to what happens to the "or something." I wanted to pick up with the minister something that he said in his answer to the previous question about the drop in figures in relativity to the unemployment rate. I'm sure the minister is well aware of the report that was published today about people's access to assistance. In that, the regression they have shows that if unemployment was one of the sole predictors for getting assistance, the number of people on assistance would be 50 percent higher than it is at the moment.

I wondered how the minister squares this. It's clearly not just being done through employment.

**Hon. C. Richmond:** I think what the member is after is an economic analysis of how we use unemployment rates, etc. We have done such a thing as a response to the report that came out today — which was no surprise, by the way. It's the same report that comes out every year about this time, and it contained almost the same information as their last report.

The report claims that the unemployment rate is the strongest predictor of the caseload. This information is used to argue that half of the caseload declined as a result of policy and not the economy. This is totally incorrect. The employment rate is a very weak predictor of the caseload, for many reasons. This is the case not just in B.C. but across Canada.

What is important is the change in employment and the total economic environment — sustained growth. Unemployment rates go up and down frequently, even when the economy is improving. In 2002, for example, the unemployment rate went up, yet the number of employed rose by 44,000. In that year B.C. experienced a very large increase in the participation rate — 64 percent to 65.1 percent. Many people on income assistance left for employment, while many more started to look for work.

[1605]

It is the two- or three-year trend in employment that matters, not the individual unemployment rate. People will leave the caseload for employment or not need assistance if they feel optimistic about the economy. Also, it is not the overall employment rate that is important to income assistance clients but employment in the selected sectors — namely, sales and services. Employment in these sectors has been strong.

This is pertaining to this report that came out today. Their model is very poor. The average error rate is nearly 10 percent. They predicted increases in the caseload in three of the six months — half the time — when in fact the caseload never increased.

**C. Trevena:** I'm not going to get into the games of defending or not defending a report that we had no involvement in writing. However, I think that it does actually have some very important information, and that is about the lack of information there and the fact that many people — and many people who I have met in going around the province — aren't getting assistance because of various regulations under the 2002 act.

The minister says the unemployment correlation is totally incorrect, but if people aren't coming to the system because they are being kept off the system, it is, again, an Alice-in-Wonderland scenario of: how are we tracking people, and how can we justify this?

In the ministry's service plan it says, on the job programs and employment plans, that research indicates that individualized employment plans, detailing specific job search activities and commitments as a condition of continued assistance benefit families and individuals over the long term. I would like to ask the minister: what research shows this?

[1610]

**Hon. C. Richmond:** I think I've got the gist of the member's question, but I'm not sure. I want to make it clear, though, that we're talking about those who are expected to work. I know there's a lot of confusion when a report, as mentioned, comes out for the Centre for Policy Alternatives, because a lot of people have difficulty separating the different categories of clients we have.

These are those people that are expected to work. I'll read from the paragraph that I believe the member was quoting from:

This group of clients includes individuals who are capable of employment, have met eligibility criteria such as a three-week work search and have ongoing employment-related obligations. Expected-to-work clients have to maintain individualized employment plans detailing specific job search activities commitments as a condition of continued assistance.

Research indicates that this approach benefits families and individuals over the long term by breaking the intergenerational cycle of welfare dependency and ending the cycle-on, cycle-off pattern that many clients have experienced. Expected-to-work clients comprise 17 percent of the ministry's caseload.

But since the report from the Centre for Policy Alternatives has been mentioned, just let me add that this centre has had a longstanding history of disagreeing with employment-based programs. They just do not happen to believe in them. That's no surprise, because the same thing is in every report that they do every year.

We happen to believe that employment-based programs for those expected to work and those able to work are the best thing that we can do for people to break that cycle of entitlement and dependence to one of employment and self-reliance. One of the most difficult things we had to do as a government was change that culture of entitlement to one of independence.

If we don't use this philosophy in dealing with those who are able to work, we will never break this cycle of welfare dependence. We are now, in this province, into four generations of welfare families. We're into the fourth generation, in some cases, of welfare dependence, and the only way we're going to break that cycle is by the programs we have put in place. They've been very successful. We've put some 46,000 people off the welfare rolls and back into employment.

We're talking, again, just about those who are capable of working and those who should be working. It has always been and will remain a strong focus of this government, even though I know there are those who are opposed to income-based programs.

There are those who would have us return to the good old days of the mid-90s, when we had 375,000 people on welfare in this province, and that's just unacceptable. People who are able to work and are expected to work do not have a choice of saying: "I'd rather stay on welfare." They have a choice of getting into one of our job programs. They've been very successful, and that's the choice we're trying to give them.

Only 40 percent of children from income-assisted families graduate from high school. Equally alarming is

the fact that children who grow up on welfare are statistically more likely to depend on welfare in their adult lives and receive six times the amount of assistance than a person raised by working parents. We still feel that not only is it the best thing we can do for the parents — get them back into employment and independence — but it's the best thing we can do for their children — make sure that their parents have a steady source of income.

[1615]

**C. Trevena:** I think that we're, in many ways, going to be repeating some of our debate from last week when there was the question of the culture of entitlement or not. At the time, I raised with the minister that access to welfare is an entitlement. It is a right in a civilized society that if somebody is in need, they have the right to assistance. They don't have the right to have to be looking for work. It is a right. It is an entitlement.

The minister didn't answer my question, I believe. I was asking what research his own service plan based this comment on. I was making no reference to the report that was published today. I was referring to his own service plan.

**Hon. C. Richmond:** The research I talked about was in-house research based on our own findings.

I do want to respond. Income assistance is a right in this province. There's no question about that. Again, to counter some of the statements made by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, we don't turn people away from this ministry. If someone comes who is in a crisis situation.... If they don't have food or they don't have shelter, we provide it for them. That's what we're there for.

Then we determine what category this person falls under. Are they a person with disabilities? Are they a person with multiple barriers to employment? Or are they just temporarily out of work? They're expected to work. They're able to work. Then we can determine exactly what assistance they need.

If someone's expected to work and that's the category we're talking about, we will provide them with a crisis grant if that is the requirement. If they don't have any food, don't have any shelter.... But they will still be expected to go out and continue with their work search for three weeks, and they will either find a job or they will be put into one of our employment programs.

We don't deny people. We just assist them. We'd rather give them a hand up than a handout, if that is what is required. There are innumerable statistics to prove our point. Studies of employment-focused welfare programs compared to human capital development programs show that employment programs lead to greater wage growth, higher incomes and reduced future spells on income assistance.

**C. Trevena:** I don't want to be diverted too long from the issue of job programs, and I want to come back to some of these other issues. However, if I might ask the minister, on the specifics of the programs that

have been in place since 2002: if it is a right for people to get assistance and if people who are desperate have that right, why is there a rule that imposes a three-week wait?

I say this because by the time people get to applying for welfare, they've not planned it, saying: "In three weeks I'm going to need welfare." By the time they get to that stage, they are desperate. They may have been looking for work up to that point. I also ask why, if welfare is a right — as it should be — there is the two-year independence test.

I'll cite an example that was quoted to me in Vernon, where there were two brothers who were applying for assistance. One had been in jail, and one hadn't. The one who had been in jail was eligible for assistance under these rules, but the one who hadn't was not eligible for assistance because he didn't qualify under the two-year independence test.

I would like to ask the minister: how, in this the only province where there is basically jobfare rather than welfare...? If the minister could tell me how he can say that it's still a right to get welfare.

**Hon. C. Richmond:** First of all, with the three-week work search, income assistance for those who are employable and expected to work is intended to be a program of last resort. The three-week work search ensures that applicants pursue employment and other resources before relying on income assistance.

[1620]

People who find a job on their own are better off than they would be on income assistance. In fact, our mathematics shows that if a person even works two days a week at the minimum wage, that person is better off than being on income assistance.

The ministry has always provided exemptions for this requirement, as I said earlier, and has continued to develop these to ensure that appropriate exemptions are provided to this requirement. I'll repeat: we do not turn away anyone who is in a crisis situation. If they are desperate, they don't have food and they don't have shelter, they get looked after. But they still must do the job search for three weeks.

On the question of the two-year independence, there is a lot of discretion to the exemption lists to waive the two-year requirement. It's not hard and fast. But I would suggest that there are some conditions that, due to factors beyond people's control, they could not have achieved two consecutive years of financial independence. One would be the person, the member mentioned, being in jail — it would be pretty hard for someone in jail for two years to provide two consecutive years of financial independence, but not if they had been independent before that — and the applicant would experience undue hardship if eligibility were denied. Again, our front-line workers have the discretion to make decisions about these people if undue hardship would occur if they were denied.

Individuals have to meet the two-year financial independence requirement only once in their lifetime. If recipients have met this requirement once, it is not



applied again if they reapply for assistance in the future. For an applicant who meets the criteria but is unable to provide verification documents, signed declarations will be accepted — for example, describing previous employment history, employment earnings and employment duration and attempts to obtain documents.

Must all individuals meet this requirement? The answer is no. There are 12 categories of persons who are exempt, and persons with disabilities are not required to meet this at all. Again, we're talking about those able to work. This includes individuals who are 18 years old and have approved persons-with-disability status. We've already said that.

The two-year requirement does not apply to applicants who are pregnant or have dependent children, including foster children and children in the home of relatives, who are under 19 years of age; who have been supported by an employed spouse or are caring for a disabled spouse; who have been incarcerated for at least six months of the two-year period immediately preceding the date of application, which handles the person that was in jail; who have been in care until their 19th birthday, are fleeing familial or spousal abuse, or have a medical condition or persistent multiple barriers to employment; or who have a two-year diploma, bachelor's degree or higher.

**C. Trevena:** I think the minister misunderstood my example about the person who had been in jail. He was eligible to not have the two-year independence test, and it was his brother, who had been honest and law-abiding his whole life but hadn't been able to find work, that didn't meet the two-year independence test. So there seemed to be an inequality there.

On the three-week wait period. That's 21 days when you have already run down all... You've maxed out credit cards, if you've got credit cards. You've spent everything. You've spent as much time as you can with friends.

I wanted to ask the minister whether he can find the information for me, because I imagine that the minister won't have it at the moment, about how many cases there have been where the three-week wait has exceeded three weeks.

[1625]

**Hon. C. Richmond:** I don't know if I can answer the question precisely for the member, but I'll try. First of all, just let me reiterate, and I have it here in writing:

If an individual has an emergency situation such as an eviction notice or hydro disconnection notice, or has an urgent need for food, shelter or a medical prescription, the client is given an expedited application.

So we wouldn't make a person in a crisis situation do the three-week work search and wait for income assistance.

The ministry recently made changes to the application process to better serve people who come to the ministry for assistance, so that our staff and people in need can begin to work together immediately. Because staff are now able to collect information when people first contact the ministry, they are able to touch base with applicants

sooner — and better assist them with their three-week work search and preparation for their application interview.

The new process provides more information upfront to applicants. The ministry provides information about other resources that may be available to a client. This may lead to more individuals self-selecting out of the application process if they are not likely to be eligible for assistance. For example, the applicant may have assets in excess of allowable limits — that is fairly common — or may be receiving income from a Workers Compensation Board claim.

It is better for a client to be able to assess this before going through the entire application process only to find that they are ineligible. The ministry also provides information about what documentation is required for an applicant to apply for assistance. The three-week work search also ensures that applicants have time to gather the necessary documentation.

Finally, the ministry has formalized its procedure in regards to a 14-day touch-back, and this was done in November 2005. This means staff will follow up with individuals 13 days after their initial contact to provide further guidance, obtain a work search report and set up an employment for an application interview for those persons who wish to proceed with an application. This service is provided regardless of how initial contact was made — in person, phone or Internet.

So we do everything within our means to make sure that the person can get through that three-week job search in three weeks.

**C. Trevena:** I wonder if the minister could provide me with figures, statistics on the number of people who have not had assistance within the three-week time limit.

**Hon. C. Richmond:** We don't have exact numbers of how many people took longer than three weeks. What I can tell you is that by far the most common reasons for denial of assistance — or cases closed without payment — are either a refusal on the part of the applicant client to provide necessary information to the ministry or a client with income in excess. Quite often we find out that they have an automobile that's worth more than \$5,000, or they have a considerable amount of money in a bank or in savings certificates, etc., and the application ends right there. But in most cases it's because they have not provided us with the information requested.

[1630]

**C. Trevena:** Madam Chair, maybe I'm not making myself clear enough. I don't necessarily want the answer today, but I wonder if the minister could provide me with the numbers of people who've applied successfully for assistance but who have had to wait for longer than three weeks to get their assistance.

**Hon. C. Richmond:** I can tell the member that I don't believe we have those numbers. We can work on it, but we don't keep such statistics.

**C. Trevena:** I would very much appreciate it if staff could work on that, because I think it would be an in-

teresting statistic. I'll come back to some of these issues later on. I did want to talk a bit more about the job programs rather than the access to them. I'm very interested in coming back to some of these issues — about the two-year independence test, the three-week time limit and other areas around this. So possibly, as the evening and days progress, the minister and I can continue this discussion.

First, I wanted to go back to the issue of the job programs. The service plan of the ministry for the coming years says that service providers are selected using a procurement and performance-based contract management process. I wonder if the minister could explain what this means and what the performance base is.

[S. Hawkins in the chair.]

**Hon. C. Richmond:** I think I've got the question right. In our service plan, it says that employment programming is delivered through community-based external service providers. Service providers are selected using a procurement and performance-based contract management process designed to ensure the selection process is fair, transparent and accountable. So we use the provincial purchasing guidelines of government.

The RFPs are put on B.C. Bid, and then they are evaluated. The proponents who are successful in the competitive contracting process have been assessed against evaluation criteria and identified as the service providers best able to perform the work. Compensation is based partly on their ability to achieve specified client outcomes.

**C. Trevena:** I wonder if the minister could tell me what the performance base is on which these contracts are based.

[1635]

**Hon. C. Richmond:** Under the current program, contractors are paid only if clients are placed in jobs and become independent of income assistance. Under the new program, it's more of a fee-for-service and an incentive for results. But they are still expected to perform up to the standards set by the ministry.

**C. Trevena:** One of the main differences between the existing employment programs and the ones that are coming in is a change in the billing from pay-per-client to a fee-for-service.

**Hon. C. Richmond:** That is correct.

**C. Trevena:** When the minister was reading into the record a moment ago sections of the service plan, he read that compensation for the service providers is based partly on their ability to achieve specified client outcomes. I wonder if the minister could explain what their specified client outcomes are and if the minister could explain what else the compensation is based upon.

[1640]

**Hon. C. Richmond:** I think I can answer the member's question. It does get a little complicated.

First of all, the service providers must take 95 percent of our clients — minimum. A certain percentage will be directed to work search and, hence, into a job. Another percentage will be directed to training programs and, thence, into a job.

There's a bonus for the service providers relative to the standard who get jobs. The standard is the previous experience of our caseload. They also, in the new B.C. employment program, must use a minimum of 25 percent of community-based service providers.

**C. Trevena:** I wonder if the minister would be able to explain what he means when he says that there is a bonus for service providers in relation to the jobs.

**Hon. C. Richmond:** The best answer I can give the member is that all this information is contained in the RFP, which is on B.C. Bid at the moment. It hasn't closed yet. It's all outlined in there, the range of bonuses. All of that information is on there, but a lot of that is still to be negotiated with the successful applicants. The bids close the day after tomorrow, and then the bonus within a range will be negotiated with the staff and the service provider.

**C. Trevena:** So this is for the new program. It's not for the existing program that there is the bonus. First, if you could answer that.

Secondly, are we talking about a monetary bonus? I'll do my thirdly when you answer.

**Hon. C. Richmond:** Yes, it's a performance-based bonus, and it's monetary.

**C. Trevena:** I wonder if the minister could tell me how much has been budgeted for these bonuses.

**Hon. C. Richmond:** The amount budgeted for the entire program is \$35 million, and the amount budgeted for bonuses is very small. I can't give you a figure today because the contracts haven't been finalized or negotiated, but it's a very small amount.

**C. Trevena:** Again, I'm a little concerned. We're talking about something that is quite a large proportion of the budget, but the minister doesn't have a breakdown of how that budget is going to be spent. I would like to ask the minister if we can have that information as soon as it is available.

[1645]

**Hon. C. Richmond:** The answer is yes.

**C. Trevena:** I would like to ask the minister if he can explain how a program that is being based on fee-for-service is going to have bonuses for meeting or exceeding targets. I would have thought that was a con-

tradition. So maybe the minister would be able to explain that to me.

**Hon. C. Richmond:** It's basically a fee-for-service for the services that they provide. During the course of taking this individual from income assistance to a job placement program, they will perform various services along the way and be paid as they perform those services. The bonuses would come due if they exceed the standard that has been set or exceed the expectations based on our data and what we expect of them. Of course, they will know the standard and what is expected, and if they exceed that standard, then there is a bonus involved.

**C. Trevena:** I wonder whether I could ask the minister whether the standards and expectations are based on numbers of people going through the system or what the standards are.

**Hon. C. Richmond:** Once the service provider has provided all the expected services and been paid a fee for those expected services, then the standard is on employment. Were they successful in placing this person on employment? That will be based on our history we have with the previous program over the last four years. Ongoing, it will be historical as to what percentage or how many people are placed on employment as compared to those who start the program and those who come out the other end and are employed. That's what the bonuses will be based on.

**C. Trevena:** I'd like to ask the minister what scrutiny there will be about the employment that people go into, on which these bonuses are based.

[1650]

**Hon. C. Richmond:** The service providers have to report to us on a regular basis as to the progress they are having with the clients. The clients also report back to us. As well, there are periodic assessments and audits done on the program to see how it is progressing.

**C. Trevena:** If I might ask the minister: who will be conducting the audits?

**Hon. C. Richmond:** We will use a combination of third-party auditors and staff. The staff, if they do any auditing, will be independent of the program. They will be staff that are not involved with the program. Even when we do internal assessments, we may in a lot of cases have them audited by a third party.

I should add: I was asked today in the media scrum if we would ask the Auditor General to audit these programs. My answer to that is that the Auditor General can look at any government program he or she decides to do, and if he decides to audit these programs, he would have our full cooperation.

**C. Trevena:** That is a comfort — that there are going to be these audits — because I think we are all

agreed that there was a problem with oversight of the previous contracts.

On the RFP for the new contracts it says that there's going to be a flat fee of \$100 per client payable at the end of the month following the completion of client intake on notification to the ministry that the referred client has either been accepted into a B.C. employment program or returned to the ministry. I just wondered whether the minister could say whether that means that the contractors are going to get \$100 if the client proceeds, or whether the contractor is going to get the \$100 just by being introduced to the program.

**Hon. C. Richmond:** The \$100 per client is for an assessment fee which they have to do on every client, and they are obliged to take 95 percent of the clients. They may return 5 percent to the ministry because they figure that they are ineligible for their program, and this may be the case, in which case, then, we have to decide which program they should go into — possibly a CAP program for some basic training. But, yes, they get \$100 per client for doing that assessment on our behalf.

**C. Trevena:** That sparks two questions for me. One is: you have the budget for the whole program, and you've got the budget of \$100 per client coming through each individual program.... I wondered whether you have the budget for how much it's going to be. You can't give me how much the bonus is going to be, but you know that you're going to start off by giving \$100 per client. If the minister can provide a bit more of a breakdown about how the \$30 million-plus is going to be spent on these employment programs, I would appreciate it.

[1655]

**Hon. C. Richmond:** To the member: I would refer her to pages 23 and 24 of the RFP. It spells it out fairly succinctly there: a flat fee of \$100 for each client accepted in the B.C. employment program as a participant or returned to the ministry; no payment for no-shows. Directed work search fee is a flat fee of \$500 per participant leaving the directed work search. Then the next box is individualized service fee. Fee based on service modules — e.g., life skills, pre-employment services. The average maximum limit for all modules combined is \$1,600 per participant, measured in aggregate.

Participant support reimbursements, maximum average payment. Average maximums measured in aggregate for each component is \$100 per participant; individualized services, \$220 per participant. Reimbursements based on actual costs incurred, billing, etc. Aggregate performance not applicable. Management fee as proposed. Directed work search fee as proposed. Individualized services, which I've just run through....

And then the aggregate performance incentive payment, based on the aggregate reduction of cohort dependence on income assistance compared to a benchmark. Maximum limit up to 3 percent of all the

fees paid to service providers, excluding participant supports. First payment made within 24 months after contract commencement, then quarterly thereafter.

**C. Trevena:** If I might ask, what is...? The minister has given us an average cost per client under the new program. I wondered if you could tell me what the average cost is of the current program that's running at the moment.

**Hon. C. Richmond:** We'll have get that number for you and give it to you. I can't give you an exact number of an average, but it's roughly the same as the new program. It's very close to the same cost per client, but we'll have to get that answer — possibly within the next hour or hour and a half. We don't have it right at the moment.

**C. Trevena:** I thank the minister for that. I appreciate that.

I just wanted, again, a comparative figure. We have, obviously, the cost of the new employment programs. I just want to know what the value of existing contracts is under the existing system and how many contracts have been issued.

[1700]

**Hon. C. Richmond:** I think I have found the numbers that the member is after. We had one service provider just under \$3 million, another one at \$72.6 million, another one at \$7.9 million and the largest at \$101 million. This does not include the windup costs of the program. But this is for six years — from 2000-2001, '01-'02, '02-'03, '03-'04, '04-'05 and '05-'06. But we don't have the windup costs yet.

**C. Trevena:** Just a quick clarification. Those are the cumulative figures. They're not for each year right the way through.

**Hon. C. Richmond:** Yes, it's for a total.... It's for job placement only — JP2, as it's called — and they're cumulative figures for those years.

**C. Trevena:** I thank the minister for that. I'm still intrigued how the breakdown of the systems past, existing and future work. For instance, I know that one of the preauthorized companies — preauthorized because they're an existing company — the West Coast Group, can continue working on the employment programs in the new system, as I understand it. I just wanted to get a confirmation that that is the case.

[1705]

**Hon. C. Richmond:** Just let me correct one thing I said on the last set of figures. Those were cumulative figures for JP1 and JP2. I said JP2 only, but it's for both.

To answer the last question, the RFQ, request for qualification, was posted to prequalify service providers as the first step in the competitive procurement process. The RFP, however, is the process by which the

ministry then selects proponents to manage a delivery service — for example, performance management and reporting finance administration — in nine service bundles against a set criteria. Those selected as proponents can then contract prequalified service providers to deliver front-line services. The ministry selected 25 percent as the minimum requirement for proponents when selecting prequalified service providers in order to strike a balance between recognizing and supporting the important involvement of community-based organizations in the local service delivery while allowing proponents sufficient flexibility in managing the overall contract for a service delivery bundle.

**C. Trevena:** The West Coast Group was preauthorized in the RFQ. Is it possible to say whether it is there as one of the ones that is bidding for the new programs?

**Hon. C. Richmond:** They have to prequalify before they can bid on the RFP, and a total of 186 service providers prequalified under the RFQ process.

**C. Trevena:** As I understand it, the West Coast Group was one of those that did qualify under the pre-authorization process, the prebid process, and I wanted to know whether the minister can say whether the West Coast Group is one of the ones that is part of the mix in this new system.

**Hon. C. Richmond:** No, I can't say, because the RFP process doesn't close till the day after tomorrow, so I'm not at liberty. In fact, I don't know anyway, and that's just as well.

**C. Trevena:** If we can just look, then, at the present employment program. I think we're in a little bit of a difficulty with bringing in the new programs right at the moment with the RFP closing in two days' time and with us doing the questions on the budget at the moment, which is somewhat problematic.

If I might look at the previous system, the West Coast Group is a large organization involved in employment programs, and I know that the West Coast Group has donated over \$61,000 to the B.C. Liberal Party in the last four years. It has also donated to the NDP. I know that it runs Job Wave and Triumph and other programs.

What's interesting is that Job Wave is also operating in Ontario. Just in relation to our earlier conversation, in Ontario Job Wave is going to be helping people off welfare after they've been on welfare for a year, not after three weeks.

I just wanted to get a little bit of clarification. I understand that, in certain cases, Job Wave has received well over \$4,000 for working with clients. I cite one specific case, which came from a freedom-of-information request by a reporter that found that the person found work very quickly with very little assistance from Job Wave, and yet Job Wave still received almost \$5,000 for working with him.

I would like to ask the minister: what sort of controls are there at the moment to make sure that the programs working with clients, with individuals who are looking for work, are actually working specifically with those individuals, and they are not just individuals passing through the system?

[1710]

**Hon. C. Richmond:** Yes, the West Coast Group is a large group, and they do good work. They're getting larger, and they intend to expand across the country. As you said, I do believe they're now in Ontario. Ontario likes the work they were doing, so they want to expand — probably right across the country. I don't know what their goals are. I have no idea.

In order for any company to spend more than the allotted amount on an individual client, they have to get permission from the ministry to do that. But they also work on averages. There are some clients that may take very little expenditure of money but others who will require a lot more.

I'm sure that in some cases they can see enough potential in a client, especially under the old program, that they would spend more money on him. Don't forget that they didn't get paid under the old program until that person worked for 19 months. So they must see something in a person in order to spend that time and that amount of money on a particular person.

It averages out. Some clients they spend a lot less on go through quicker, and others, they don't. But under the new program, if they spend more than is allocated in the various boxes — if you look on those pages in the RFP — they will have to get permission to do that.

I want to clear up something else that the member said, too — that X amount of dollars was donated to the Liberal Party. Well, that's how our system works, and I have no idea of how much money they donated or to whom.

Also, I want to quickly point out there is no political involvement in the selection process. I have no idea who prequalified. I know the number: 186 service providers qualified to bid on the new process, and that's all I know. I don't get involved, nor would I. I'm purposely kept in the dark on this until the ministry makes the decision of who gets a contract. Then everyone will know, including me.

**C. Trevena:** The minister talks about an allotted amount for each client but doesn't have a figure for how much is allotted for each client under the present system. I did want clarification on what sort of scrutiny there is, seeing as in the case I cited the company got \$4,865, and yet the client basically just registered with them. That was it. So I was asking the minister, and if he could clarify it a bit more: what sort of scrutiny is given to those companies in their handling of the clients?

[1715]

**Hon. C. Richmond:** The present contracts, which the member is talking about, are performance-based

contracts. It means they only get paid for independence due to employment. They receive no payment for a client who does not become independent. They receive less for a client if their client does not become independent for 19 months, and they only get the full amount of the contract under the present system if that client is employed for 19 months. So I'm not sure I follow.

The inference was that the company received \$4,800 but that the client didn't receive employment or wasn't employed. What I got from the member was that the client registered with them and then walked away. No? If I'm incorrect, then please let me know.

**C. Trevena:** Yes, minister, the client registered with the service provider, found work independently, although they were registered with the service provider, yet that service provider was still claiming that client on their books. I raise this because this is one of the largest service providers that the ministry has been working with. It is Job Wave. So I wanted to know what the scrutiny was on that and that there would be scrutiny under the new system.

I'd also like to ask.... The minister has been talking about, in this discussion, the amount they're getting paid per client. I would like to ask the minister again what that figure is that the companies are getting paid per client under the existing system.

**Hon. C. Richmond:** I believe that last number we agreed to provide you in the next hour or so. We will get back to you and do that.

If a person registered with a service provider and then found employment, I don't know how much work the service provider would have done, but then they're entitled to be paid for that client. Some, they would spend a considerable amount of time on getting through the program, and others, like the example you cite, probably went and found a job and are working. Once they're registered, I guess the service provider could say: "Well, maybe that was a bit of a bonus we got, because we spent a lot more money than that on the couple of previous clients."

That would be the only explanation that I have. That's under the current program, which is really now over. In fact, I don't think there are.... Some of them will still be operating for the next couple of months on that.

Under the new program there will be much closer scrutiny on this fee-for-service model, and if they go outside the bounds, they first of all have to seek permission from the ministry.

**C. Trevena:** I'll come back to the new model in a moment. I just wanted to continue a little bit on the existing model. I know that the minister.... As I say, we're all aware that it is the model that is going to be not in existence by July, but it is still operating at the moment, and the other one has been developing.

[1720]

I think, minister, you know that we have received a copy of your deputy minister's calendar through

freedom-of-information requests. I have some specific questions in relation to the employment programs and the deputy minister's calendar. In August of last year your deputy minister met with the West Coast Group. It's got names in the calendar. I don't know if you need them, but I just wondered whether it is possible to say what this discussion was about. Also, I would like to know what stage the redesign of the employment programs was at in August of last year.

**Hon. C. Richmond:** The meeting last August took place before the RFQ, the request for qualifications, went out. At that time the ministry was in the consultative stage with our service provider. In fact, I think there was probably more consultation with stakeholders, service providers and staff than with any other request for proposals that's ever gone out.

The deputy assures me that she did meet with several service providers — and so did other senior staff — up to the time the RFQ went out, and then there were no more meetings on these subjects. I guess that's about as clear as I can make it for you.

**C. Trevena:** I'd like to thank the minister for that. I just wanted to clarify that in October, when Ms. MacDonald met with the minister regarding Job Wave.... I wonder if it'd be possible to explain what was being discussed about Job Wave at that time.

**Hon. C. Richmond:** We don't have any details here on specific meetings with us. The only thing, in my recollection, that we talked with service providers about at that time was how we would transition from the old system to the new system, how we would wind up the contracts and how we would manage that transition period, which we're going through at the moment.

[1725]

**C. Trevena:** I'd like to ask the minister then.... There was an assumption that both the West Coast Group and Job Wave would continue to be involved with the provision of services.

**Hon. C. Richmond:** No, we make no assumptions. They will be involved up until the end of June under the old system, and we'll be trying to transition people. They will know probably in the next month if they have been a successful bidder, but we have no way of knowing that at the moment. When these RFPs are closed the day after tomorrow, then they will be evaluated, and Job Wave may be a successful bidder. We don't know that at this time.

**C. Trevena:** I'd like to ask the minister about the approach of these new training programs. In the existing ones — and this is all we have to go on at the moment.... As I mentioned right at the beginning of this afternoon, there is a sense that many of the programs are inappropriate for the needs and for the people and that people are being pushed through just to make up numbers so that the service providers can make the

money that they will get from the individuals. So I'd like to ask the minister a couple of questions about this.

One of the issues is about training. These programs are putting people into training courses. When I was in the interior a couple of weeks ago, I was told about the Southern Interior Construction Association having entry-level courses, two or three weeks, to try and fulfil the huge demand there is for labour in the interior. There is a boom there, a building boom, and they want construction workers, but they need to make sure that those construction workers are trained. However, the training course for that specific organization costs \$1,300. What I learned from people working on ministry issues in the interior is that people are not entitled to go on those training courses if they're on income assistance.

So I would like to ask the minister why people couldn't do that sort of training, which would give them skills for long-term skilled labour, and what criteria are given to these companies that take the ministry's money to put people through training programs to get them into proper training courses.

[1730]

**Hon. C. Richmond:** I will try to answer your question as best I can, but I'm at a loss to know exactly what you're asking. Our service providers are paid to take a person through job training and through to a job search. Then if they decide they wish to go into the construction business or.... We had a request recently from a truck driving school, because there's a shortage of truck drivers, to pay for a truck driving course, which was about \$15,000. We don't do that.

Our service providers have bid on, and will have received, a contract to take our people up to a certain place where they're job-ready. It's the same as the big call centre in my hometown of Kamloops, which is hiring as many people as it can. They're up well over a thousand employees now. They put people through a one-week course — I'm sure it's one week — to train people to work in a call centre.

We don't do that, but we do take people up to the point where they're ready to embark on another course, such as a call centre course, a construction worker course, a truck driving course, or welder or whatever.

I hope that answers your question. If it doesn't, then give it another shot.

**C. Trevena:** Yes, I'll give it another shot. The training programs that are available are job-specific training programs, as I understand it. What I wanted to know is why there cannot be flexibility in the specific job training programs, if this is the route that is going to be used for trying to move people into employment.

**Hon. C. Richmond:** I guess the best way to explain it is as I did before. The new program has a lot more flexibility than the old program, and we are able to tailor programs to individual clients. We do have people who provide construction programs. I'm sure that if the service provider thought the best place to put that

person was in that program, then that's probably where they would go.

But again, we are limited somewhat by the amount of dollars we have, and some of these programs are pretty expensive. Like I mentioned, the truck driving program is in the neighbourhood of \$15,000. We just don't have those kinds of dollars to put a person through that program.

**C. Trevena:** This program that I was citing was \$1,300. I'd like to ask how much per client per training course is available.

[1735]

**Hon. C. Richmond:** I guess the best way I can explain it is that under the current program, which is winding down, the service provider could elect to buy a seat in a program that's put on by, I believe you said, the homebuilders or the construction association. In fact, they do that now under some other programs. Hardhats, I believe, is one. They do have the ability to do that.

The average job placement cost was about \$2,200 per client, so they do have some flexibility and are able to buy a person — one of our clients — a seat or a spot in one of these programs. But it's up to the service provider to make that evaluation and that judgment call.

**C. Trevena:** I know that the minister keeps saying this program is winding down. However, this is a program that has been in existence since 2002 and is still in existence until July of this year.

As I am understanding it from what the minister is saying, it is completely up to the service provider to decide which courses this service provider will pay for to send the clients on — whether it is in a private or public college, whether it's in a trade school or whatever. This is completely up to the liberty of the service provider. I would like to get that clarified from the minister.

Secondly, I would like to know from the minister what input the client has into this. In many cases I've talked to clients who have wanted to go in one direction, but the service provider has pushed them into another direction.

**Hon. C. Richmond:** The client's input into the program is very important. Service providers that the staff and I have talked to — especially in the old program, which is what the member is talking about.... They don't want to put a person into a program that that person doesn't want to go into, because they probably wouldn't be successful, and therefore the service provider wouldn't be paid.

[1740]

They do take very much into account what the person wants to do and try to fit them into a program that's tailored to their needs. I don't think anyone's going to be successful if they're forced into programs they do not want to be in.

**C. Trevena:** I think the minister and I will disagree on this one, because the number of clients and organi-

zations that I have talked to and advocates who have found that their clients have been pushed towards programs that they do not want to be involved in.... I can count numerous and have heard of very few where the clients have really had any input or any choice.

The minister raises a question for me. Why do it? Because the service provider won't get paid if the client doesn't do it. I wanted to clarify that under the new system, the one that starts up in July under a fee-per-client basis, the service provider will still get paid whether the client completes various stages of the program, according to the boxes that the minister quoted earlier. I would like the minister to clarify that, please.

**The Chair:** Minister, noting the hour.

**Hon. C. Richmond:** Just to try to answer the member's last question, then we'll take our dinner break. If you go again to page 23 of the RFP, which closes this Wednesday, the service provider gets paid a fee as they go along. If the client drops out partway through, they don't get paid any more.

If the client goes all the way through the program and then decides that he or she still doesn't want to go to work, then they have the option of either going and getting a job that they've been trained for or no longer qualifying for income assistance. Also, the service provider then doesn't get any bonus — the up to 3 percent that they're entitled to for managing this client. If you look on page 23, there is a lot more control that we as a ministry have over the service providers in the new system than we had in the old system.

Madam Chair, noting the hour, I suggest we take our dinner break now, and we will recess until 6:45.

[1745]

Motion approved.

**The Chair:** The committee stands recessed until 6:45.

The committee recessed from 5:46 p.m. to 6:44 p.m.

[S. Hawkins in the chair.]

On Vote 25 (*continued*).

**C. Trevena:** Madam Chair, I would like to continue talking a little bit about the job programs, the training programs, as we were doing before the supper break. I'd like to ask the minister about the employment program for people with disabilities.

[1845]

There was a report written last year, which was made public earlier this year and put on the ministry website. It states that mental health clients are seen as a group not particularly well served under the existing model. So I would like to ask the minister why people with mental health issues are not being well served under the current model.

**Hon. C. Richmond:** First of all, I don't know where the member got the phrase "they weren't being well served." But perhaps she can tell me that.

I was at an event recently, out in Saanich, where one of our service providers named Triumph celebrated the 1,000th person with disabilities being placed into employment. It was very impressive, and it was very heartwarming to see this happen. The person involved was one of those people that went through a very rough time in his life and had been virtually ready to give up until he had been.... Somebody saw something good in him, as he said, and they put him into one of our job placement programs — the Triumph people did. He is now gainfully employed, and his employer is happy, and he's happy. I haven't heard about persons with disabilities not being well served by our programs.

Let me also, while I'm on my feet, answer the question that you asked before the break. We said we would bring back some figures to the best of our ability. These questions were, past and future, about the employment programs. We want to make it as clear as we can about where we've been and where we're going.

In the past job placement programs, there were several variations with the average cost per accepted client being \$2,200 — average. The amount you referred to of \$4,865 was very early in the program, prior to 2001.

At any rate, the job placement programs served the larger volume of clients we used to have. As I said, in the future.... We covered this earlier — the client base has changed. The profile has changed dramatically, so the new programs have been changed to better reflect that change in our client base and to be better able to tailor the programs to the individual, rather than a one-size-fits-all scenario.

**C. Trevena:** The reference I have for the mental health is the *EPPD Review: Summary of Findings*, December 1, 2005, Janet Heino, Heino and Associates, page 3, General Access: "Mental health clients are seen as a group not particularly well served under the existing model." So I would like to ask the minister: what is being done to make sure that mental health clients are being better served?

[1850]

**Hon. C. Richmond:** The community assistance program is one program which helps clients with multiple barriers, which the mental health people that she refers to fall under. It helps people with multiple barriers achieve greater self-reliance, become more involved in their communities and to move along the employment continuum into higher-level employment programs or ideally into employment. But generally, it helps to prepare them to get into an employment program.

The decision to revise CAP was influenced by the desire to respond to the changing nature of the caseload, in particular the needs of an increasing number of clients with multiple barriers, which includes mental health. The opportunity to continue to improve

program management by strengthening consistency of services, accountability for results and improved collection of information about what works for this client group....

The B.C. employment program, the new program, is just that. It's an employment program. Its purpose is to assist clients who are able to work move into independence through sustainable employment as quickly as possible. CAP 2 will not be an employment program. Instead, it will provide more challenged clients with the opportunity to improve their quality of life and to participate more fully in their communities. Development of CAP 2 is currently underway. A program model will be completed by early summer. Before finalizing this model, the industry will draw on a number of sources, including best practices from other jurisdictions and feedback from current service providers and other stakeholders.

**C. Trevena:** The minister was referring to employment for people.... The employment program for people with disabilities is the program I was referring to. It was a report that your department commissioned. In this report it also states on the same page that there has been a wide variation in milestone payment amounts within each group and between programs for similar milestones — page 3, *EPPD Review*.

To me this sounds like the different providers are being paid different amounts for pretty well the same service, so I would like to ask the minister whether this is the case.

[1855]

**Hon. C. Richmond:** I think the report the member is referring to is an administrative report concerning programs for persons with disabilities. We don't have it in front of us at the moment, but this report will form part of the renewal of the program to be reviewed in the next year. It's not an evaluation, but it will be reviewed.

The ministry currently has two programs under the employment program for persons with disabilities: pre-employment services and planning and employment services. The services provided in the two programs together offer a full continuum of services that assist persons with disabilities to move toward employment to the degree that they are able. The full integration of the two programs will consolidate services into a seamless, flexible and accessible program for clients.

It is the ministry's intention to extend the current EPPD contracts to June 30, 2007 and, where possible, to amend the contracts to address some of the elements of the integration. A fully integrated service delivery model will be implemented July 1, 2007.

**C. Trevena:** So these programs are not being rebuilt; they are being extended. I would like to ask the minister a little bit more about them because there are some hurdles — some challenges, as they say — according to the review of it.

As well as the issue of potentially different milestones — which I would still like the minister to re-



spond to — and different goals, it also states in the review that there have been duplications of some services and payments when clients are referred in error to PES or P and E and then re-referred to more appropriate or alternative services. I'd like to ask the minister how this duplication of services and payments has happened and how this is going to be addressed?

**Hon. C. Richmond:** First of all, just so we can keep everything straight, we have the job placement program and the Training for Jobs program, which are becoming the B.C. employment program for employable people on July of this year, '06. Then we have the employment for persons with disabilities and the placement programs — I just forget the exact name of it — PES: pre-employment services for people with disabilities, which are being extended to July '07. They're being improved as we go along.

The report you refer to is not an indictment of the programs. It's just saying that they can be improved, so we're doing that. Then we have the CAP program, which is being revamped to CAP 2 for the more barriered people, for those who just have to learn the basic life skills.

[1900]

So going forward into the coming year, those are the programs that we have. Again, the employment program for persons with disabilities and the pre-employment strategy for persons with disabilities are being improved as we go along, and they will carry on till July of '07.

**C. Trevena:** If the minister would clarify these issues.... I realize that this is a review of the EPPD scheme. It is referring specifically to PES and P and E schemes. There has been in the review, up to this point when the review was carried out in December 2005, duplication of some services and payments when clients are referred in error.

What I would like to ask the minister is whether this is of concern? What is being done to rectify it, and how much payment and duplication has there been?

**Hon. C. Richmond:** Well, number one, yes, it is a concern. Two, that's why we're going through the program now: to improve it. How much duplication? I can't answer that question at the moment. I just don't have that here. We don't have a copy of the report here either.

**C. Trevena:** I would like to ask the minister if he will add this to the list for his staff to find out: what programs were duplicated at what cost?

**Hon. C. Richmond:** This report, which we don't have a copy of in front of us, was strictly to point out where there were some administrative errors, because there were two programs running simultaneously, and in a few cases, there was some duplication of services to a few people.

That's why (1) we're looking at the programs and (2) we're integrating them into one program. It's in the works now to put it into one program, but we have no way of telling you exactly how much duplication there was. There was some. Different service providers were providing roughly the same service to the same client in a few instances, because the two programs were running parallel to each other. That's why this report pointed that out and said we had to tighten up the administration, and that's exactly what we're doing. That's why they're being integrated into one program instead of two.

**C. Trevena:** If I can ask the minister whether his staff can provide details of that duplication and the cost of the duplication, I would appreciate it.

In the report — obviously, I realize the minister doesn't have a copy of it, but just to let him know — in appendix two, it's talking about the amount charged per client from 2002 until 2005. This varies from \$3,000 to \$6,000. I wondered if the minister can explain why there is such a variation in the charges per client?

[1905]

**Hon. C. Richmond:** On the first question: can we provide you with dollar amounts? The answer is no. We just don't have them. We have no way of telling you that.

The discrepancies in the payment to different clients. Remember, these are all persons with disabilities, and they all have different needs. That's why there are different amounts for different people.

**C. Trevena:** I try not to duplicate questions or have two questions at once. Going back to the information, would the minister's staff.... If they don't keep details of how much money they're paying twice for the same client for the same program provided by different providers, perhaps the minister can provide me with the number of times and programs where this duplication has occurred.

**Hon. C. Richmond:** To clarify: they're not duplicate payments for the same service. They're paying two different service providers and two different programs. The number of times this happened is very minimal. It happened very rarely, but it did happen, and that's why we're integrating them into one program, so that won't happen again.

As for the amounts, we have no way of telling you that.

**C. Trevena:** I would hope that the minister and the ministry do get a breakdown from the service providers of how much they are spending on various programs. The ministry would, therefore, be able to find out how much they are spending twice for the same program. This, as the minister would very rightly say, is taxpayers' money, and I think the taxpayers have the right to know just how that money is being spent. So I

would like to know whether the minister would make the effort to try and find out about this.

**Hon. C. Richmond:** First of all, we do know how much we pay our service providers for each client, but the situation that I'm describing is not as if we're paying for the same service more than once. What there is in these two programs is an overlap. One program has certain things in it, the other program has certain things, and occasionally they do overlap. This was pointed out to us as administratively probably not the best thing we could do. That's why we're changing.

The amount is very minimal. To repeat: we do know exactly how much we pay each service provider for the service provided. Where the programs overlap like this, and not 100 percent, it's very difficult to say how much money that overlap in the programs cost us. We have no idea of calculating that. What we are doing is changing the administration and changing the programs and making them one program instead of two.

[1910]

**C. Trevena:** I just wondered what the minister might mean when he's talking about minimal — whether it's thousands, tens of thousands, multiple tens of thousands.

**Hon. C. Richmond:** I haven't seen the report myself, but I'm told the report is not concerned with paying twice for the same service. It's that there is an overlap in the planning and employment services and the pre-employment services. For example, from July 2003 to September 30, 2005, the ministry served 4,809 clients under the planning and employment services. Under the pre-employment services, from December 2002 to September 2005 the ministry served 4,293 clients — for a total of about 9,000 clients.

To repeat, it's not a duplication of paying twice for the same service. It's that there were these two programs, pre-employment and EPPD programming, running simultaneously, and there was some overlap within the programs. But they're not duplicates, and there was no duplication of payment for the same service.

**C. Trevena:** If the minister hasn't read the review of one of his programs for people with disabilities, when the government is talking about making this province great for people with disabilities.... I won't belabour the point, but I would like to ask the minister one last point on this report before I wrap up on this.

It's going back to the amount of money given in the contracts and the variation from approximately \$2,500, \$3,000 up to \$6,000. It goes back to one of my earlier questions. The maximum rate for clients, \$6,000 per client, is paid to the West Coast Group. I would like to ask the minister why the services for the West Coast Group are more expensive than the services of any other provider.

[1915]

**Hon. C. Richmond:** First of all, the West Coast Group doesn't get paid any more than anyone else for

the same service. They happen to be providing more service to more people than most other service providers, but they don't get paid any more for a service provided than anyone else.

Let me just say this, so I don't leave any misconceptions out there with the public who may be watching tonight. We put great emphasis on persons with disabilities and persons with multiple barriers to employment. In fact, our emphasis over the last several years, but the last year in particular.... We increased the rate of income assistance to those with disabilities by \$70 a month — the first increase for many, many years. We have increased, since we became government, the earnings exemption for persons with disabilities and persons with multiple barriers. It is now up to \$500 a month. It hadn't been increased for many years before about 2003, when it went from \$300 to \$400, and this year it has gone from \$400 to \$500.

We have committed in this government to providing the best services available anywhere for persons with disabilities. We intend to follow through on that commitment over the next decade. The plans that we have in place are not all going to be done in one budget or two, but they're going to be done over the next several. We have made some great strides in that regard in dealing with persons with disabilities, especially, and people with multiple barriers to employment. I just want to leave the true picture out there of what we are doing for people with disabilities.

**C. Trevena:** I'm very pleased that the minister does want to leave the true picture of what's happening for people with disabilities. I know that the minister talks a lot about inclusivity, that in the service plan....

I know that we have already talked about the issue of earnings exemptions and how much this is going to cost people on disabilities and how much it is going to cost the ministry. We were talking about this on Thursday. In the service plan itself, the minister's staff write that they want to have independence of people on disabilities founded on financial security as one of the founding stones.

However, it does come back to an issue of disability rates — how much people get, how much people get for their shelter. I was in Prince George, and a grown man was in tears because he was on disability benefit and he can't take his son to a hockey game because the level of money he gets on disability doesn't allow for the luxury of entertainment. I mean, this man isn't going to be working again. He is on disability benefit. He can't get it together to earn his 500 bucks a month. He's condemned to live in poverty because of the low level of rates — because of the low level of shelter rates and the low level of disability rates.

I would like to ask the minister once more whether he will consider looking at the level of rates for both people on assistance and people on disability assistance.

[R. Cantelon in the chair.]

[1920]

**Hon. C. Richmond:** To the member: the persons-with-disability rates.... I assume the person she's mentioning has one child, and if that is the case, then that person now receives \$1,471.91 a month.

I just want to read a few more things into the record, since this subject has come up. B.C. is a leader in community living for persons with disabilities. It's the only province with a provincial bus pass program for persons with disabilities. So they can get to the hockey game without having to own a car. Vancouver is one of the most accessible cities in the world. I do want to say we've got to move beyond accessibility to inclusion, but that's another subject which we've covered somewhat here.

B.C. has the highest percentage of persons with disabilities who have at least a high school education — 71.4 percent. B.C. has the second-highest percentage of people with disabilities with post-secondary training — 46.2 percent; 44 percent of working-age people with disabilities are employed — the fourth-highest employment rate in the country after Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba. We'd like to increase the employment rate significantly to 56 percent, because I have met with these people and their advocates on many occasions, and believe me, these people want to work. They are not expected to work. They have, some of them, some pretty severe disabilities, but they want to work, and we want to do everything we can to assist them to do that.

We know that there's much work to be done, but we have much to be proud of. This is why this government is committed to achieving goal number three: to build the best system of support in Canada for persons with disabilities, as well as those with special needs, children at risk and seniors.

**C. Trevena:** To the minister: I, too, would like to read some issues into the record from people with disabilities who are on disability benefit, who have managed to get their 23 pages, their form, filled out — possibly with the help of an advocate, possibly without. But they've actually managed successfully to claim disability benefit, which is a feat in itself.

"I would not wish this life on anyone. I would like to see the people in power live this way for a little while. They may feel the pain, the shame and the humiliation I live with on a daily basis. It is so demeaning."

From another person:

I have a disability, and I struggle every single day with it and watch how it progresses with such vigour. I have to worry where I'm going to find the funds to pay my utilities that continue to increase and increase. I get \$325 for my shelter, and yet my utilities take half that, so I pay my rent and take the rest owing out of my grocery — support — funds. I have a niece that lives with me, and I have to support her on my disability cheque, because I can't get her on my disability, because she is not my child.

I dream of the day when I can afford to live in my own small space that is not only accessible, but mine

alone. I have existed with roommates and feel it is but one step above living on the street. I would love to have the wherewithal to cook regular, decent meals for myself or to be able to eat out once a week but cannot do either.

Minister, no matter how many people on disability are working, there are always going to be a large number who are not going to be working. So I'd like to ask the minister again. One of the big issues that comes from people with disabilities is the level of their shelter allowance. I'd like to ask the minister, yet again, whether he will be considering raising the level of the shelter allowance.

[1925]

**Hon. C. Richmond:** Well, I guess, to reiterate — we had this discussion last Thursday — we do look at assistance rates on a regular basis, at a very minimum once a year, but usually more often. We have to allocate our dollars that we get in our budget where we see fit and where they will do the most good. We understand that some rates could be higher. They will be eventually, but that doesn't mean we're going to be able to accomplish everything in one budget or two.

This is why this last year we have concentrated — for the very reasons you mentioned, hon. member — on persons with disabilities. We have put our resources significantly, if not mainly, into persons with disabilities by raising their monthly allowance by \$70 and by increasing their earnings exemption to \$500, and for volunteering, to \$100. We're very cognizant over here of persons with disabilities.

I, too, read some of the letters. The one that said, "I wouldn't trade this life for anyone" — I don't blame them. I've visited many of these people and talked with them, and I always think: "There but for the grace of God go I." I feel for these people very deeply. That's why we do our very best to make sure that people with disabilities are looked after in this province. We're going to continue to do that, at least for the next decade, as we build our goals for the decade to come.

**C. Trevena:** On the issue of allowances and increases in allowances, the ministry did increase the amount for disabled people by \$70. I recognize that. But I understand that the ministry also made a commitment to the Association for Community Living that their rates would be increased. The comforts allowance only went up by \$10. This is causing great distress for people who are having the comforts allowance, who are often in the same accommodation as the people who get disability.

As I say, I understand that a commitment was made that the comforts allowance would be raised to end this discrepancy. I would like to ask the minister when this disparity will be equalized.

**Hon. C. Richmond:** We know that there is a disparity between clients with developmental disabilities in residential care. They were impacted by this disparity in the provision of assistance when residential care providers chose to pass the \$70 rate increase through to

clients receiving support and shelter. Other clients received only a \$10 increase in their comforts allowance.

Currently there are differences in how assistance is paid to adults with developmental disabilities residing in residential care. Clients may be paid in one of the following ways. Community Living B.C. pays a per-diem rate to the residential facility for the client, and the Ministry of Employment and Income Assistance provides the client with a monthly comforts allowance.

[1930]

MEIA provides support and shelter to the client, and the client pays the residential facility out of their disability assistance cheque. Employment and Income Assistance also pays a per-diem rate to the residential facility for the client and a monthly comforts allowance directly to the client. This ministry and Community Living B.C. are working together to resolve this issue and rationalize the payment of assistance to mutual clients in residential care.

A project charter and implementation plan have been developed. The next step in the project is to complete a data match between Community Living B.C. and the Ministry of Employment and Income Assistance to identify each client in residential care, how each client is being paid and the amount of assistance each is receiving. Target date for the completion of this very complex project is the end of March 2007.

Community Living B.C. was established in July 2005. Since that time they have focused upon an effective transition from the Ministry of Children and Families and the care and well-being of their clients. Both Income Assistance and Community Living B.C. have identified this issue as a priority and are moving to resolve this discrepancy as quickly as possible.

[S. Hammell in the chair.]

MEIA and CLBC are committed to supporting a smooth transition and ensuring minimal negative impact on CLBC clients and residential service providers. Once the data match has been completed, the ministry and CLBC will need to determine the budget impact of the various options for rationalizing the assistance. Impact on existing contracts and contracted service providers must be analyzed and implementation coincided with contract renewals or modifications.

**C. Trevena:** I would like to ask the minister whether that means that the discrepancy will be balanced out and the people who at the moment are receiving just a \$10 increase will receive the \$70 increase.

**Hon. C. Richmond:** As I said in my long dissertation, the target date for completion of this very complex project is the end of March 2007, so at the moment I can't answer the question.

**C. Trevena:** The \$70 increase came last year, so I was wondering why it is going to take, in all, approximately 18 months — almost two years — to sort this

out. I wonder whether he could explain this, because I know that many people are very discomfited by this.

**Hon. C. Richmond:** Yes, I understand that. It is our intent to clean it up as quickly as we can, but CLBC is a new organization. They're contending at the moment with a lot of problems that a new organization goes through, and they are working with us to resolve this problem. It is complex, and it does affect budgets. We have committed to complete it by March 2007.

**C. Trevena:** I know that the Association for Community Living is very eager to get this resolved. I think that if there was dedication on behalf of the ministry to try and resolve this sooner than the 18 months to two years it's going to take, the Association for Community Living would be working full speed with the ministry to resolve it. I would like to know whether the minister can commit to a speedier resolution and the commitment that there will be the matching of the moneys.

**Hon. C. Richmond:** The time line that I've outlined is a time line that has been committed to by the two parties — by Community Living B.C. and by this ministry. If there's any way that we can do it quicker, we will.

[1935]

**C. Trevena:** That is good to hear. I hope both sides will work speedily to resolve that.

I wanted to ask a little bit more about the issue of disabilities, because it is clearly a priority for the ministry. One of the issues that keeps coming up when I'm talking to people is the administrative issue. It's the issue of a 23-page form to be filled out to claim PWD — a form for which, often, when people are filling it out and take it to their doctors, their doctors don't know the right key words or which boxes to tick, so people do get denied their PWD.

My first question actually goes back to the report we were talking about earlier — the review of employment programs. It states that there are no data systems to collect meaningful client data that relate to costs or outcomes; that it's impossible to compare service provider performance; that verifying pre-employment services, invoices and client documentation is not standardized; that there is no system with which to cross reference; and that it is impossible to determine what services were provided and when without conducting a client file audit on every client.

We have one system where, clearly, data is not organized, and this is dealing with many tens of thousands of dollars in employment programs. Yet when somebody is dealing with applying for a benefit, they have to go through countless weeks to apply, have to go through extraordinarily complicated forms, have to get an advocate, usually, to try and help them, if they know where to get an advocate.

I'm just a little confused by the disparity here. One is that we can let an employment system go through where there are no data balances, where the forms are

not built in, yet we have a system where people claiming the benefit have to go through rigorous checks. I'd like the minister to explain to me this apparent discrepancy in what is needed.

**Hon. C. Richmond:** I think I can answer the question very thoroughly. The application form is 23 pages in length, seven pages of which are instruction and information, and is divided into three parts. The applicant section is only three pages and is the same length as the previous disability benefits level two form. Applicants are not required to complete this section, or they may choose to have it completed by their designate.

The applicant's physician completes five pages in the second section, providing information on diagnosis, health history, degree of impairment and the impact of the impairment on daily living activities. The applicant's physician or another health professional completes eight pages in the third section, providing more detailed information about the impact of the applicant's impairment on their daily living activities and the level of assistance required with those activities.

[1940]

Health professionals who may complete the form are defined in legislation and include medical practitioners, psychologists, nurses, occupational therapists, physiotherapists or social workers. Physicians and other health professionals were involved in the design of the form, and it has been generally well received by the health professional community as an appropriate method of gathering information required for evidence-based adjudication.

I'd like to add here that when a person receives person with disability status it's something that they maintain then for probably the rest of their life. It's a very serious designation, and a lot of people want it who aren't entitled to it. That's why there is a very complete form that people have to go through and that has to be filled out by medical professionals, because when we give that designation of PWD, we don't give it lightly, and it's there for a long, long time.

**C. Trevena:** I would like to ask the minister a little bit more about this, because those people that I've talked to trying to get PWD — yes, they know it's a very serious thing — have frequently been turned down until they have an advocate working with them. I think this is one of the problems that is developing with the system: to access it, people need advocates. To be able to get it... I've talked to people who have applied several times, had it turned down, found somebody to advocate for them and got it.

Further, with the ancillary benefits that you can get on PWD.... Often people are not told about these. They need to get the advocate to push for their case. What I would like to ask the minister is: will he look at streamlining the system so that people are not finding that they fill in a form one time, get turned down; a second time, a few months later get turned down; a third time, get turned down; and finally, in despair, find some-

body who can advocate for them and can get it? Would the minister please give a commitment that the system will be designed to help the people rather than to bar them?

[1945]

**Hon. C. Richmond:** First of all, we are always trying to make things easier for people, especially easier for people with disabilities. But, again, we must be very diligent in processing PWD applications, and quite often we find — more often than not — that when a person is turned down, it's because the physician's part of the form was not filled out properly or completely. Quite often when they go back for the second time and say, "Look, get these forms filled out properly; they're not complete," the application is usually successful.

But anyone denied PWD designation is entitled to reconsideration and may appeal that decision, if their reconsideration is not successful, to a tribunal. The appeal tribunal is independent and arm's length to the ministry and the client. The client may submit oral or written testimony in support of existing information and records.

The process to adjudicate applications for the PWD designation is intended to ensure effective adjudication resulting in sound, evidence-based decisions that are consistent with the eligibility criteria in the EAPWD Act — clear communication to an applicant who has been denied the PWD designation.

We don't feel that advocates are, indeed, necessary. Medical practitioners fill out the form and complete the form. Like I say, as often as not there are things missing from the application. Once these are pointed out to the applicant and they go back and get them redone, they are successful.

**J. Brar:** I have a couple of questions — simple ones. If a senior leaves the province on December 31 to attend a New Year's function in Calgary and comes back on January 1, will that senior receive the seniors supplement for the months of December and January or not?

**Hon. C. Richmond:** The answer is no. They wouldn't lose their seniors supplement if they were gone for one day, as you say, from December 31. Presently, if they're away for a good portion of a month, they can lose their seniors supplement for that month. It's changing on April 1. We're going to up it to three months. They can be away up to three months, and they will not be penalized. That's due to change in just a few days.

[1950]

**J. Brar:** Well, I've received a public policy document from a senior which indicates that if the senior leaves the province even for one day, they lose the benefits — the supplement for that month. But I understand what the minister is saying, and I hope that is correct. I also appreciate the change which is coming in the future.

My second question. The seniors supplement was reinstated last year and the rationale supporting the decision was that "this monthly payment supports the lowest-income seniors in British Columbia by topping up their federal guaranteed income supplement benefits." It was further stated that "this change will benefit almost 40,000 seniors, including some of the lowest-income people in the province."

When I met with the seniors in my constituency of Surrey-Panorama Ridge, they told me that this benefit does not reach the most deserving seniors, particularly those who do not receive the guaranteed income supplement. In other words, the seniors supplement is not available to the seniors who have no income and need this benefit the most.

Will the minister explain to those seniors why all low-income B.C. senior citizens were not offered the seniors supplement?

**Hon. C. Richmond:** Complex question, but I think I've got the answer for you.

On your first example, though, where someone leaves the province for a day or so: if you have an example of that — that someone's lost their supplement — let me know. Give me a name, because that shouldn't happen. We pride ourselves on being just full of common sense over here, and we don't look for ways to punish people.

The seniors supplement, as the member read out, is a top-up to the federal GIS program. If you're not eligible for GIS, then the client would probably be receiving income assistance. If they don't get the federal guaranteed income supplement, they would be on income assistance at \$856.42 for a single, and health assistance and dental and MSP and Pharmacare, so there are very few....

In fact, in the entire province there are only 600 clients who are not eligible to receive the income supplement because they're not.... It's a top-up to the federal program, and these 600 people are not eligible to receive that federal program, so they would instead be on income assistance.

[1955]

**J. Brar:** Thank you to the minister for the response, particularly the response on the seniors supplement. Let me rephrase my question. I'm talking about the seniors.... There are a number of seniors who are not receiving GIS because they are under the sponsorship agreement, but they are citizens of this province and citizens of this country as well. They're not receiving income assistance as well, but at the same time, I think that since the intent was to give the supplement to the lowest-income seniors, those people do not receive it because of the sponsorship agreement.

I would now rephrase my question again: would you consider providing or offering those seniors this supplement as well?

**Hon. C. Richmond:** At the moment, the way the regulations are, if the person is not entitled to the guar-

anteed income supplement from the federal government, we can't top it up. It's only a top-up program. But just to repeat, if they're not eligible for the seniors supplement, they are probably eligible for income assistance. They get income assistance at the PWD rate, the persons with disabilities rate, which is \$856-plus a month for a single person, plus they get the health assistance, the dental, the MSP and the Pharmacare.

There's another angle to this too, though. There is some responsibility that should, if it doesn't, fall back on the sponsor, on the person who sponsored them here, if they're on income assistance. That's a whole other matter that we can go into: who is responsible for paying the amount for sponsors, etc. That's another topic, but they do receive income assistance if they are at the very low end and have no federal program of income supplement. Then they do go onto income assistance at the PWD rate.

[2000]

**J. Brar:** This is an issue of sponsorship, and a significant majority of those people don't receive income assistance. Let me give you one example that this government.... We have a precedent in this province that the benefit of a subsidized bus pass is being given to all low-income seniors in British Columbia, which was not available to those people earlier. They don't receive a GIS, but they still receive the subsidized bus pass.

Having said that, would you consider offering the supplement to those seniors who do not receive income assistance as well as the GIS supplement?

**Hon. C. Richmond:** Going over the figures, if the federal government is not paying a guaranteed income supplement and we were to pay the seniors supplements, it's only \$49.60 a month, which is very, very little. They're far better off, if they are at that very low end of the income scale, to go on income assistance at \$856.42 a month, plus they get all the medical that I outlined — the dental, MSP, Pharmacare — which the seniors supplement doesn't get them.

If we were to look into giving them the seniors supplement, I don't think they would be as well off as they are on income assistance. Remember that the seniors supplement client does not get dental or zero-deductible Pharmacare either. We could take a look at it, but right now I think they're better off to be on income assistance on the PWD rate.

**C. Trevena:** I was talking with the minister about disability issues and about the difficulty of accessing the PWD entitlement, the difficulty of completing the forms, the need for advocacy to complete those forms.

It's very interesting. As I mentioned, it is not just people with disabilities who find it easier to get onto assistance with advocacy. Many people do. In fact, I would suggest that the minister himself realizes this in his support for the Vancouver outreach project, the downtown east side outreach project, because their people are getting assistance to get onto the system.

I would like to ask the minister whether he would not look at funding more advocacy programs to ensure that people actually get access to the system rather than just negating their need.

[2005]

**Hon. C. Richmond:** On the outreach pilot projects we're doing, I must point out that we're not working alone on these but with a team of people. In Kamloops, for example, we're working with the AIDS Society, the New Life Mission, the city and other advocacy groups to do an outreach, and it's the same in the downtown east side of Vancouver. We're working with all these organizations to reach out to these people that may not even be aware of the services available.

When these pilot projects are finished, which I expect they will be very soon, we will be evaluating them to ensure that they do meet the needs of the clients. We will examine them, as I say, on completion of these projects to see whether they are truly meeting the needs of identified groups. Then, if we find the results favourable, we will do our best to integrate them into our budget in the coming years. If dollars permit, and we can integrate them into our programs, we will do that.

They aim to ensure the clients have income assistance, housing and community based on social services. Again, I point out that we're working as an integrated team on these, and it's not just one ministry that's doing it. We've undertaken a number of these projects, ranging from youth outreach, homeless outreach, health and dental supports for barriered clients, skills training, etc.

The projects have included the out-of-the-rain youth shelter program, Vancouver Island, where 231 youth were assisted; evening outreach support services for those living outdoors in the Comox Valley between February 12 and 18, when 134 adults and seven children used these services; the Vancouver urgent response team, with our participation in this ministry, through the availability of ministry workers to the Vancouver urgent response team to do outreach detox centres; Vancouver homeless outreach project; single parent basic computer skills project; Prince George conference on fetal alcohol spectrum disorders, etc., and the Kamloops integration project, which I mentioned.

These will be evaluated in the coming months, and we'll make every effort to incorporate them into the budget of the ministry.

**C. Trevena:** I was not looking at the broader projects. I was looking at advocacy. I suggest the ministry's advocacy is helping people access the system. The minister himself has talked about how positive the Vancouver outreach project has been and how successful it has been.

I would like to know, therefore, how much of the budget has been put aside for these projects — the Kamloops project and the downtown east side project. How much ministry money was budgeted in the last

year for this, to give an indication of how much will be budgeted for subsequent years?

[2010]

**Hon. C. Richmond:** I guess the best that I have here is an aggregate total of about \$500,000 for 12 one-time projects for 2005-2006. These are projects that are intended to make an immediate and positive difference for more barriered client groups, such as at-risk youth, drug addicts, alcoholics, abused women or single parents, throughout the province. The total for these 12 projects is \$500,000.

**C. Trevena:** I would like to ask the minister how much has been budgeted for the coming year for outreach and advocacy projects.

**Hon. C. Richmond:** As I said, the projects aren't completed yet. When they are completed, we'll do an evaluation on them and decide, through staff, whether all of these projects were worthwhile and how effective they were. Then we'll have to determine the amount that we will put in the budget for them.

**C. Trevena:** Madam Chair, to the minister: I'm clearly a little confused about the way that you prepare the budgets. I would like to ask the minister whether there is a line item anywhere in the budgets for any advocacy work. If there isn't, where will the money for advocacy come from?

**Hon. C. Richmond:** First of all, we will not be funding advocacy groups per se for these. These are outreach programs. We do provide funding to some advocacy groups, but these are outreach programs, which are separate. They would come under "Supplementary Assistance." They're in the supplementary assistance overview on page 6-1 of the.... We have sufficient funds in there to provide for this type of outreach program should we determine that they are useful and serving the purpose for which the pilot project was developed.

**C. Trevena:** That provokes two questions. One is: which advocacy groups is the ministry funding?

[2015]

**Hon. C. Richmond:** I didn't mean to mislead the member in saying we fund advocacy groups directly. We fund community organizations — 69 of them, to be exact — through the CAP program or other programs. They may also be advocacy groups, but we don't fund advocacy groups per se directly. But we do disburse a lot of funds through the 69 community organizations.

**C. Trevena:** Clearly, by funding these organizations, there is a recognition for the need for advocacy to help navigate the system. Therefore, I would like to ask the minister whether he would make the system more accessible and decrease the need for advocacy.

**Hon. C. Richmond:** I've almost forgotten what the question was now, but it was to do with the funding of advocacy groups.

We go to great lengths wherever possible to make our services very accessible to our clients, to people who require our services. We do not have a mandate to fund advocacy groups. In most instances, if many of these people would sit down and talk with our staff, I am convinced — after being in several offices — that they would find the need for an advocate is not necessary or that the advocate is right there in our office in the form of one of our staff members.

[2020]

We do fund community organizations that provide a service, and as I said, there are 69 of them.

**C. Trevena:** The minister, in his statement, assumes that these staff are easily accessible and willing to share information, which is not the picture that is being painted by many people who are using the system. The people using the system are finding that they are calling a 1-800 number and holding for 40 minutes and that they are not being told of all their benefits. It's only when they do have an advocate that they find out they're entitled to more than they have been claiming. I think if the system was more streamlined, maybe this would be the answer.

I'd like to briefly, before pursuing that, go back to the previous answer or about two answers ago where the minister said that this money for the outreach was coming from the supplementary assistance budget and that line there. So this money for outreach is up against the money for bus passes, for the healthy kids, for employment, clothes, residential care facilities, guide dogs, medical equipment and MSP premiums. This is one of the other budget items. I would like to know from the minister, in his projections for this coming year and the subsequent three years, how much is going for each of these line items in the supplementary assistance program.

**Hon. C. Richmond:** I guess I could read out the whole sheet of what's involved in supplementary assistance by service line, but I'll read out as best I can the items that the member mentioned.

The budget is \$1.933 million in total. Senior supplements: \$20 million. The bus pass recovers \$40 million. There is a subtotal for health assistance which includes medical equipment, medical supplies, optical program, adults and healthy kids, natal supplement, monthly diet, monthly nutritional, disability assistance, medical transportation, medical services program, professional assessment, health service award, tribunal appeal board, dental services, adults, healthy kids and ortho. Total: \$89.992 million. That's just the health assistance broken down. But in that budget we can, I'm sure, find the amount necessary to fund the outreach programs that we think are useful.

**C. Trevena:** I would ask the minister if I could have a copy of that breakdown, and I would like to ask the

minister, when he has worked out how much will go onto outreach, whether he will inform me of how much he is going to be spending on outreach.

**Hon. C. Richmond:** The answer is yes.

[2025]

**C. Trevena:** I thank the minister for that.

In talking about access to the system and ease of access to the system, I just want to raise a couple of — I guess, for me — conundrums. It's going back to a discussion we had earlier this evening. When people apply for welfare, they have the three-week period when they have to look for work. I'd like to ask the minister: what happens to those people who have looked for work in that three-week wait period, have found work but can't get to it because they have no money and can't get any assistance because they found work and they don't qualify for assistance? I just wanted to know how the ministry deals with these problems.

I know they're not isolated instances. I've had many of them come across my desk — where somebody has applied for assistance, gone off and got a job before the three weeks are up, but now can't get to the job and can't get housing, and it ends up being better staying for three weeks and waiting till they get on assistance.

**Hon. C. Richmond:** To the member: it is a bit of a conundrum in one sense. If the person, this hypothetical person you're talking about — who's not on income assistance because he's in the three-week job search — finds a job, technically we cannot provide him transportation because he's not on our income assistance rolls. There may be other programs through the federal government or some other agency that he or she can access, provided they actually do have a job.

A lot of them do not have a job, though they tell you they can get a job if you'll only buy them a bus pass to Vancouver. But a lot of times they just want to get to Vancouver. If they provide us with the name of the employer that we can make a phone call to and say, "Does this person have a job with you?" then maybe we can find the wherewithal to get him or her to Vancouver.

But if they are on our rolls, if they're on our income assistance rolls, then there's no problem. We have the authority and the discretion at the local office level to say: "Yes, if you tell us the name of your employer and let us make a phone call, we will make sure that you get there, because we don't want you to lose this job."

[2030]

**C. Trevena:** I'm very comforted by the fact that if the person gives the name of the employer to one of your workers, the worker will contact the employer and pass on the information and possibly give a bus ticket. I think that's very good information to have, and I think many people will be very comforted to know they might be able to access bus money from the ministry for that.

Earlier on I was asking about West Coast Group and cited the deputy minister's calendar, which we got



through freedom of information. There are a couple of other items on it that I wanted to ask about. On August 25, 2005, Ms. MacDonald met with Greg Thomas from PricewaterhouseCoopers in regard to feedback on an alternative service delivery project. I wonder if the minister could explain what the meeting was about.

**Hon. C. Richmond:** The deputy tells me this meeting was in regard to the ministry she had just left — Management Services. These people wanted some feedback from her on the ASD program, the alternative service delivery program, so it was on a ministry that she was leaving as a deputy and had come to this ministry.

**C. Trevena:** A couple of other items have come to my attention that I just wanted a bit of clarification on. One was that in the next month, September, Ms. MacDonald held a meeting noted as: "FOIPPA — Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act — urgent." This was the beginning of September, and I wonder if the minister can explain what happened at that meeting.

**Hon. C. Richmond:** The deputy tells me that the meeting was in the same context as the previous answer. It was due to the interpretation of some acts within her previous ministry. It was a meeting with the Ministry of Labour and Citizens' Services, who took over the responsibilities for the Minister of Management Services.

[S. Hawkins in the chair.]

**C. Trevena:** Just to continue this. Later that month Ms. MacDonald had a briefing session with the minister labelled "shelter allowance." I wondered whether this was a discussion, as we have discussed through this process, about the possibility of lifting the shelter rates.

**Hon. C. Richmond:** No, I think it just goes to prove my statement earlier that we discuss rates all the time — several times a year — and I think that was one of those occasions when we were discussing shelter rates.

[2035]

**C. Trevena:** I would very much like to be a fly on the wall during one of these discussions, seeing as the shelter rate has stayed at \$325 for more than ten years. I feel that it must be people sitting around and saying: "Tut-tut, it's still \$325. Well, too bad. We're not going to do anything about it."

A couple of other items that were in the diary did provoke interest. On November 4, 2005, Ms. MacDonald met with the ADM of the Ministry of Forests and Housing to discuss the provincial housing strategy. I wonder whether the minister can tell me what was discussed at that meeting and whether the new provincial housing strategy will involve the Ministry of Employment and Income Assistance.

**Hon. C. Richmond:** No, I can't. And no, I won't.

**C. Trevena:** I wonder if it's possible to explain the links, because obviously, the Ministry of Employment and Income Assistance deals with shelter issues and shelter rates. I wonder why there would be a discussion on housing with this meeting of the provincial housing strategy.

**Hon. C. Richmond:** We meet with other ministries across government on a continuous basis. In fact, this government is working very hard to work cross-ministries and to knock down the silos that are in place. This is why we have caucus committees on social programs and caucus committees on economic programs, and we meet constantly with other ministers to see where we can assist one another on a cross-ministry basis.

It appears to me that the member is on some sort of a witch-hunt with the deputy minister, and I'm not going to tolerate it any further. In these estimates are discussed the spending estimates of this ministry for the coming fiscal year — period.

**C. Trevena:** I'm not on any sort of witch-hunt with the deputy minister. I am trying to find out the workings of the ministry, to find out where the spending is. I have asked the minister several times for information on the spending, and he has at times said he hasn't actually got it. He's waiting for reports to come back. He's waiting for things to be complete. He may look at it. He doesn't have budget lines.

I'm not trying to provoke confrontation. I am trying to find out information about the workings of the ministry. This procedure, this estimates procedure, is one of the ways that we in the opposition can find out what is happening in the ministry, so I will proceed.

I would like to ask the minister about another meeting that was held that has direct relation to the ministry as I would understand it, a meeting about the disability savings plan. I would like the minister to tell me whether he can explain what the disability savings plan might be.

**Hon. C. Richmond:** From time to time we have proposals offered to us by outside groups. They have an idea they think the ministry should pursue. We have a policy — at least I do — that we meet with everyone who has asked for a meeting, within reason. I don't think we've refused a meeting with any outside group. This happened to be a proposal put forward by a third party, and we decided to take a look at it. It was one of those ideas we took a look at, and that's as far as it went.

**C. Trevena:** I'm very pleased that the minister says he is willing to meet with any group that wants to meet with him. I think it's a very healthy approach.

I would like to ask one question about this. As I'm sure the minister is aware, we did also get a freedom-of-information request for his own schedule for the

months of June through December — basically, the first six months the minister had the portfolio again. I was obviously interested to see how the minister was getting reacquainted with the portfolio. He has had it before and so was quite familiar with it.

[2040]

During this time I noticed that the minister went to many of the meetings that we all went to — with loggers and truckers and new car dealers and forest product manufacturers and buildings trade manufacturers and B.C. Wood and the B.C. Council of Tourism. I count 15 industry-sponsored events.

In the same period, the same first six months of the ministry, I notice that the minister met two organizations involved with his ministry: the B.C. Association for Community Living and a reception held by the B.C. Special Olympics. I wonder if the minister could explain what he was doing in those first six months to reacquaint himself with his file and do the outreach to the advocacy groups that he has been saying throughout this estimates process he has been doing.

**Hon. C. Richmond:** I don't have the luxury of having my schedule from June through December with me, but I do remember meeting with persons with disabilities — the minister's council on persons with disabilities, several advocacy groups all at one time in the downtown offices in the World Trade Centre. And yes, I did meet with the tourism organization. They are big employers of people on our income assistance rolls, or people who work as our service providers in that.

I certainly remember meeting with an awful lot of groups and touring the downtown offices to reacquaint myself with the ministry. I was in three or four of our different offices in Vancouver and in Kamloops, and since then, in Prince George. I do try to meet with everyone possible, and I have yet to turn down a request for a meeting from an advocacy group.

**C. Trevena:** As I say, I'm very pleased that the minister is willing to meet with advocacy groups, and I think this is something that advocacy groups will be very pleased to know. I'm sure they will be getting in touch with the minister.

Noting the time, just one last question for the minister. In all his meetings, in all his outreach, I wonder whether he has ever been to the downtown east side in these last few months since he has been made the minister again.

**Hon. C. Richmond:** The answer is yes. Several times.

**C. Trevena:** I thank the minister for that. I'm very pleased that that's the case, because he can then see — literally, with his own eyes — what the impact of the policies he is implementing has on many people who are living in the downtown east side. I hope that the minister also gets the opportunity to go around the province and talk to many other people about what is

happening with the results of the policies that he is responsible for.

With that, Madam Chair, noting the time....

Vote 25: ministry operations, \$1,369,415,000 — approved.

**Hon. C. Richmond:** I move the committee rise, report resolution and ask leave to sit again.

Motion approved.

The committee rose at 8:45 p.m.

The House resumed; Mr. Speaker in the chair.

Committee of Supply (Section B), having reported resolution, was granted leave to sit again.

Committee of Supply (Section A), having reported progress, was granted leave to sit again.

Hon. C. Richmond moved adjournment of the House.

Motion approved.

**Mr. Speaker:** This House stands adjourned until 10 a.m. tomorrow morning.

The House adjourned at 8:47 p.m.

---

## PROCEEDINGS IN THE DOUGLAS FIR ROOM

### Committee of Supply

#### ESTIMATES: MINISTRY OF EDUCATION AND MINISTER RESPONSIBLE FOR EARLY LEARNING AND LITERACY

The House in Committee of Supply (Section A); H. Bloy in the chair.

The committee met at 3:21 p.m.

On Vote 24: ministry operations, \$5,195,667,000.

**Hon. S. Bond:** I am pleased today to present the 2006-2007 budget estimates for the Ministry of Education. First of all, I would like to introduce the ministry staff members who are here to assist as we proceed through the next couple of days. I would very much like to thank the staff. They do a remarkable job behind the scenes every day for the students of British Columbia, and I know they're an outstanding team. I want to express thanks to each of them and to those who are not here with us today.

With me today is the Deputy Minister of Education, Emery Dosdall; Rick Davis, who is our superintendent liaison; Ruth Wittenberg, who is the Assistant Deputy Minister of Management Services; and Keith Miller, the lead director for funding. We also have a number of other staff people that would be available as we need them, but certainly I know that Claudia Roch, lead director of accountability, and Monica Pamer, lead director of achievement and assessment, are also waiting to participate.

Just a few weeks ago in the Speech from the Throne a vision was laid out that maps the direction that this government would like to take as we move into British Columbia's future. We then tabled a budget that set out the commitments that will get us to that destination. This year we're focusing our sights on British Columbia's most important resource, and that is our children. We've set a course towards prosperity, and in fact we've made a very good start, but eventually we know that our children will be the ones to carry this province forward.

If you look inside our classrooms today, you will see British Columbia's future tradespeople, doctors, scientists, educators, musicians, athletes — and, in fact, our leaders. We have a duty to make sure that we prepare them for the future. Education isn't about shuffling students through grades. It's about preparing our citizens and our children to become productive, educated citizens. That's why we've pledged to make British Columbia the best-educated, most literate jurisdiction on the continent, and that's what this year's budget works toward.

This year the Premier and I have made an unprecedented commitment to public education in British Columbia. We've committed to visit every school district in the province during the coming months, and we've already started those visits. I can tell you it has been exciting to meet with educators, parents, trustees, students and support workers. We are excited about the opportunities that we have to hear their concerns about education and, most importantly, their ideas about how to make our world-class education system even better.

In the meantime, though, we've continued that commitment by announcing the highest budget in education that British Columbia has ever seen. This year in the budget it noted that we're providing an additional \$421 million over four years to ensure the well-being of our most vulnerable students, to enhance services to children with special needs and to provide better support to those who care for children and at-risk youth.

[1525]

The budget for education has grown from \$4.59 billion in 2000-2001 to \$5.19 billion in 2006-2007. Now we will be adding another \$112 million over the next three years, in addition to the \$325 million previously announced. That's an increase, in total, of over \$437 million over the next three years for measures designed to ensure our students' success. These are dollars that we will see reflected in the classroom and that, hopefully, continue to translate into higher student achievement.

As we continue to increase funding, we're also faced with the reality of declining enrolment. Next year we are increasing funding for school districts by \$20 million. At the same time, districts are forecasting that they will have 7,000 fewer students. This means that the average per-pupil grant will increase by \$114 to an estimated \$7,207 — the highest amount ever. This funding will help ensure that our students continue to be among the best in the world.

For students to be at their best, they have to begin with a strong foundation in literacy, and it's no accident that this is one of government's major focuses. The reality is that 22 percent of adult Canadians have serious problems dealing with any printed materials. Canadians with the lowest literacy skills also have higher rates of unemployment — 26 percent — and they're more likely to have lower incomes than those with higher literacy skills. Over 80 percent of Canadians at the lowest literacy level and over 60 percent in the second-lowest literacy level have no income, or incomes of less than \$27,000. That's unacceptable, but there is hope.

Literacy is a great example of an area where governments, the education system and communities have really pulled together. In fact, all 60 school districts have declared improving literacy to be a top priority in their accountability contracts, and all 60 will receive funding to continue to improve, expand or renew their local efforts.

For the second year in a row we are providing \$5 million for literacy innovation grants, supporting innovative programs and teaching practices to improve our students' reading and writing skills. We are also providing \$1.8 million to public libraries to increase child and adult literacy and \$50,000 to the Books for Babies program. In fact, the B.C. Library Association and the provincial government will distribute more than 40,000 Books for Babies reading kits to new parents in British Columbia.

Literacy is just one of the foundations of education. We also know that children who are healthy and physically active learn better, both inside and outside the classroom. Of course, there's no way for government to legislate good habits, but we're doing what we can to ensure that a student's education includes good health and plenty of physical activity.

That includes the \$3.8 million that we just announced we will be investing in our children's good health, which includes \$1.5 million to Action Schools B.C. for a healthy eating component, physical activity bin supplies and teacher support and training; \$1.3 million in direct funding to public schools to purchase physical activity equipment; \$950,000 to develop a provincial health network of healthy schools; and \$50,000 to B.C. School Sports to support the volunteer committees that host zone and provincial championships for over 400 schools. These measures build on the work being done through ActNow British Columbia.

We've also committed to working with school boards, health authorities, vending machine companies and others to eliminate unhealthy food in B.C. schools

over the next three years. We worked with B.C. nutritionists to develop the guidelines for healthy food sales that came out in November. This is all part of our approach to healthy living so that when the Olympics come in four years, British Columbians will be the healthiest people to host those games.

While we ensure that our students have this strong foundation, we're also giving them better choices and access to learning opportunities. Technology will play a great role in helping us achieve this. Distance learning has long been a part of B.C.'s education system, providing our students with a flexible way to achieve their learning goals. Currently there are 16,000 students enrolled in distance learning courses throughout the province, making British Columbia one of the largest providers of distance learning in North America.

This year we're taking distance learning a step further by launching a virtual school. The virtual school will be a one-stop site for distance learning students to find the classes and courses that best meet their needs. More details will be coming shortly on how we are bridging the barriers of distance and time in education. Nothing can ever replace the value of a teacher in a classroom, but distance learning is a great option for students who want or need to pursue studies outside a traditional setting. It's one way we're recognizing the importance of providing choice and flexibility in education by taking action.

[1530]

Trades training is another way we're taking action to give students more programming choice. Every day we're hearing more and more news about the demand for workers in skilled trades. If we're going to build a strong economy in this province, we have to make sure that students are able to take advantage of these opportunities. One way we can do that is to give students the chance to jump-start their futures by learning a trade or technical skill while still in high school.

Over the next three years the province will provide \$400 million to expand skills and training opportunities. We've also invested \$1.2 million in industry trades training for secondary students. This allows students to earn credits towards graduation while completing level one of a provincially recognized apprenticeship program. We've partnered with the Industry Training Authority to launch a \$1.4 million trades awareness program for students in grades six through nine, and we're also investing an additional \$3 million to expand the BladeRunners program giving at-risk youth a chance to enter construction trades with on-the-job preapprenticeship training.

In addition to all of this, we're investing \$2 million for new youth training in mining, in minerals exploration — similar to BladeRunners but in our rural communities. These tools will give students who want to pursue the trades a great chance to get their start while they continue to pursue their academic goals.

We are also going to work harder than ever to give our aboriginal students all the support and resources they need to succeed. We'll continue to work with our school districts and aboriginal communities, and we'll

work to set new incentives in place to help students who have dropped out of school. While we set goals for aboriginal student achievement, we'll be working to incorporate aboriginal culture into the classroom, making learning relevant to aboriginal students.

Another area I'm especially proud of is the work going on to support our students with special needs. Special needs funding for schools in British Columbia increased by more than \$45 million this year to well over half a billion dollars. This spring we're going to be releasing the first-ever report on special education achievement to find out how our students are doing. This annual report will monitor student progress and help our educators see areas of success and identify areas needing more attention.

One of the measures we're going to use to find out how special needs students perform is the annual foundation skills assessment. This assessment monitors the performance of grades four and seven students in reading, writing and numeracy. I'm pleased to say that since 2001 the percentage of grade four students with special needs meeting or exceeding expectations in reading has increased by 10 percent.

During the same time, the percentage of grade seven students with special needs meeting or exceeding expectations in writing has increased by 14 percent. Across the board, B.C. students with special needs are seeing improvements over their 2001 results, and that's a success they can be proud of. We're going to continue to work with our learning partners to ensure that they continue those improvements.

While we accomplish all of these goals, we realize that a parent is a child's first and most influential teacher. We're going to make sure that vital role is recognized by ensuring B.C. parents continue to play a strong role in our education system. For example, we've announced a new provincewide parents education network to provide up-to-date information on programs and research that parents can use to help their children succeed in school.

We've also launched an e-newsletter called *Education Report* to give parents a regular update on what's happening in education in our province. We've provided the B.C. Confederation of Parent Advisory Councils with \$75,000 to develop a new edition of its handbook, and eliminated the PST on school supplies. We've provided \$100,000 for the training of school planning councils, a leadership school — another important tool to ensure that parents have meaningful input into decisions that affect their children's education.

Today, and I'm sure for many other days, we're going to discuss various items in the Education budget. I look forward to that discussion, but I wanted to begin by reminding us all that what we're discussing here today isn't just about budget items. This is the future of our province. It's how we intend to realize our vision of being the best-educated, most literate jurisdiction.

[1535]

Each of the programs and plans that I've outlined today are steps that will take us further towards our

destination. We're not there yet. We have to keep moving forward, and we have to try new things. We have to start on the right path, and that's what this budget does for our children. Thank you for the time.

**J. Horgan:** Full marks to the speech writer. It's difficult when one has a shopping list of expenditures to make it interesting for all those that are listening, but I'm certain that those in the committee room today were captivated — and those that were watching at home.

I want to begin by highlighting a few points that I missed in the minister's comments, and then perhaps tomorrow when I've had the benefit of reviewing those notes or having a look at them at the end of the day, I can comment more fully on some of the individual programs that were cited. But what I didn't hear — and perhaps I did step out for a moment, and I apologize for that — was any discussion about class size and class composition in any meaningful way.

In my role as official opposition critic for the Ministry of Education, I have been taking the minister's advice, and I've been travelling the province and talking to stakeholders, the various individuals that make up the great system of K-to-12 education we have in British Columbia. Bar none — if I can steal a phrase from a great goal — the fundamental issue on the minds of teachers, administrators, trustees, parents and some students is class size and class composition.

I didn't hear that from the minister, and I know we'll be spending a good deal of time on that over the next number of days, so I'm confident it'll be fully canvassed. But as it is the most important issue, certainly, identified to me as I've been travelling around meeting with parents and students and teachers and others, I'm surprised that it wasn't in the inventory today.

Over the next number of days I'd like to canvass a range of issues with the minister and her staff — certainly, the role and function of parents in the system. I have a renewed interest in that area, and perhaps we can explore that in more detail than we did last fall, particularly the school planning councils, an area of particular interest to me.

We spoke in the fall about volunteer fatigue and statutory obligations for parents. I then met with the BCCPAC and in no uncertain terms was advised that parents were more than equipped to take on the job. I never intended to leave them with the impression that they weren't capable of doing the work. I was more concerned about the number of people taking on increasing responsibilities as volunteers in our community. That remains a concern of mine, and I'd like to canvass that more fully with the minister.

The accountability agenda — as it's called by those who are opposed to it — or the importance of accountability — as it's called by those in favour of it — is another area that I think we need to spend a good deal of time on. My colleagues have a list of issues in their communities that they are going to canvass, and I'm going to try and do that in a coordinated way as best as possible. Certainly, the staff that are with the minister

now are more than capable of answering any question I think we could contemplate over the next number of days.

The other issue that I think is again top of mind is how we get to repairing the relationship with the group in the stakeholder list that I believe is most integral to realizing the outcomes that I know the minister and I share, and that is the teaching fraternity. There is, and there remains, a disconnect between government and that large and important segment of the public school system, and I'm going to be interested in hearing the minister's views on how that relationship can be repaired.

I've now heard three throne speeches that have made reference to a teacher congress but no dates, no details. I'm hopeful that the minister will be able to narrow that down so we can clear our schedules and get on to that important function. I do know that the minister is travelling with the Premier and others to various districts, and I'm hopeful that she'll entertain advising MLAs not just on the government caucus but on both sides the House. When she has come into town I would have been delighted to travel to Khowhemun in Duncan with her, with Principal Charlie Coleman to discuss issues in my constituency. It's a shame I wasn't advised of that, and I'm confident that when we get to district 62, I'll get a little note that the team is coming.

With that, I'd like to begin a line of questioning around school planning councils. I'd like to ask the minister if she could advise me how she intends to deal with the recent withdrawal from those bodies by teachers.

[1540]

**Hon. S. Bond:** We think that school planning councils are absolutely critical to how we move forward in the public education system. We've had no specific confirmation from the B.C. Teachers Federation directly that they intend to withdraw. I'm very disappointed by that, but certainly, school planning councils will continue to play an integral role in the system.

**J. Horgan:** Well, I have the excerpt from the School Act here with reference to SPCs, and I'm wondering how we're going to be meeting the requirements of the act without teacher participation.

**Hon. S. Bond:** I'm continuing to be hopeful that teachers also will see the value. I can tell you this. We attended a webcast, actually — the reason that the member makes comment about my trip to Duncan. It was publicly attended by 1,500 people across the province. A webcast is the reason I was there. All 1,500 people were there to celebrate the role of school planning councils. They were virtually with us from all across the province.

There are teachers participating in that process every single day in the province. Amazing things are happening. There was a school planning council that came and demonstrated how effective they were. I continue to be hopeful that we will actually put student

success at the centre of school planning councils and that they will continue.

**J. Horgan:** I think it's fairly important that we clarify early on in the piece that I don't have a lot of difficulty with the way our school system is functioning. I have children in the system. They're doing very well.

By and large, as I said in the Legislature today, I'm pretty happy with the product, as are most British Columbians. But it is my role and function to raise issues that have come to my attention, and I intend to do that over the next couple of days. I hope the minister won't take this personally, and I hope that we can have a reasoned debate and that when I bring up ideas of opposition that have been brought to my attention, she won't be overly defensive and we can peel these onions and see what the root of this discontent is.

To get back to the school planning councils for a moment. Last fall I asked the minister if she could advise me how many districts are fully functioning and how many schools are without planning councils. Does the minister have that information today?

**Hon. S. Bond:** As far as we're aware, there are two districts that do not have teacher participation at this point in time. I met recently with DPAC chairs. In fact, one of the things we're going to be discussing over the next number of months is how to create a more consistent approach to school planning councils across the province.

**J. Horgan:** So only two districts? Every other district is fully compliant with the School Act with respect to fully functioning SPCs in every school?

**Hon. S. Bond:** There might be individual schools within districts, but certainly, as districts, there are two that we're aware of where there is no participation.

Consistency is an issue with school planning councils, as people sort of support or don't support the process. As you know, there are literally over a thousand schools. We know that there are some challenges yet with the evolution of SPCs, but the vast majority of schools have them in place, and they are working very well.

**J. Horgan:** Well, I was in Penticton two weeks ago and, certainly, very positive responses there. Other districts, not so much.

Again, can the minister give us a number? What percentage of the thousand-odd schools in British Columbia have functioning SPCs?

**Hon. S. Bond:** We don't have a specific list of schools that are participating. Our basic assumption is that districts actually follow the law.

**J. Horgan:** That's a good assumption to make. I would too. But again, when we are fixated on performance measurement, as we have been over the past number of years, one would think that numbers such as these would be easy to come by. I gave four months'

notice on the question — that I would be coming back to ask it.

[1545]

Let's assume, then, that not all schools have functioning SPCs. How many of them are operating with a degree of success? We could use as an example the disposition of funds following the clawback of the labour dispute last fall. Can the minister give me any indication of how that went, of how many SPCs participated?

**Hon. S. Bond:** The process actually worked very well. There were cases where school planning councils did not get the kind of discussion they felt they should have had, and that's been made clear to me. But let's be clear here. One of the things we look at in the system is the whole degree of how school boards manage their own districts. The allotment of the money to school planning councils was received very well, particularly by parent groups, because it gave them a chance to have legitimate discussion with their parent groups, as well, about what resources should be used in their schools.

We believe that school boards obey the law and that they would put school planning councils in place, and to date it has not been one of the things where we've actually asked for an accountability in terms of the number of schools that have either functioning or not-functioning school planning councils.

**J. Horgan:** So the minister cannot advise this committee — when we're in a discussion, in broad terms, about school-based budgeting or school-centred learning.... The first tentative step toward that initiative would be school planning councils, where local teachers, local parents, local administrators make decisions. We can't have a definitive answer on how many of those are functioning under the School Act in British Columbia at this time.

**Hon. S. Bond:** We would assume there's one in every school, because it's the law, and school boards are actually required to follow the law. When you talk about student-centred leadership or school-centred leadership, at this point in time that process is a voluntary participation. We have a number of districts who are well along the way already to being ready to do that type of model.

It's a pilot project, but you know, when things are new, it takes some time, and people become ready at differing stages across the province. That's the evidence we're seeing. We're seeing amazing success from many school planning councils. Others need a little bit of help, and that's one of the issues we'll be dealing with, with BCCPAC. In fact, we've just set aside money which we've given to support school planning council training.

**J. Horgan:** Good answer. However, that still leaves me wondering about the two districts that were mentioned at the start of this line of questioning. I think the

minister acknowledged that two districts weren't functioning. That then leads me to believe that they may well be out of compliance with the School Act. Is that the case?

**Hon. S. Bond:** In fact, those school planning councils are continuing to operate, because parents and administrators want to see that kind of collaboration taking place. In the Nanaimo school district we continue to see people being involved in a community and working together to make the best decisions for their students.

**J. Horgan:** I suspect I'll have to have periodic disclaimers as we go through the week. I have no doubt that those who are working hard on SPCs and with PACs and DPACs right across the province, those that are working to improve the condition of students, are doing the best they can. I have no doubt of that. Again, I have to go back to.... As a disclaimer, it is my job to determine if we're turning a blind eye to those that are not working so that we can shine a light on those that are.

As much as I want to celebrate the successes, as the minister does, I think it's important and right as we do our work here in the Legislature that, when we do find disconnects or dysfunctions, we highlight them and take steps to resolve the issue. I hope that when I suggest we have difficulties here, the minister doesn't believe that it is somehow a slight to those that are working effectively. I would like to perhaps, then, get the second district. If I can assume that Nanaimo is one, what would the other one be?

[1550]

**Hon. S. Bond:** The Vancouver school district.

**J. Horgan:** While we're on the topic of school planning councils, there are prohibitions to participation. One that's been brought to my attention, startling as it is, is that members of the Canadian Union of Public Employees cannot participate in their children's schools. Is that the case?

**Hon. S. Bond:** I want to go back and just clarify, because I don't want cards and letters pouring in. In Vancouver it is the elementary schools, so there may well be participation at the secondary....

That is correct. CUPE members do not sit on planning councils. That was part of the original decision made when they were created.

**J. Horgan:** Why would any democratic government want to exclude a group of individuals from participation in public life?

**Hon. S. Bond:** The decision was made to create school planning councils in that way, and obviously, anytime you draw the line and say that a particular group of people will be involved, there are other groups who feel excluded. The decision was made that CUPE would not be involved.

**J. Horgan:** I don't know if the minister or her aides are grasping what I'm saying here. Parents at Belmont high school in my community — if they are members of CUPE that work for the school district — are prohibited from sitting on school planning councils. It's not an arbitrary thing. It's a prohibition of a particular class of individual in our community. How could anyone have made a decision like that?

**Hon. S. Bond:** I'm going to be cautious and not comment. Apparently there is a lawsuit underway at this particular point in time related to the role of employees being involved on school planning councils.

**J. Horgan:** That certainly begs another question. I heard a muttering. Had it been me, I would have been in front of a court pretty quickly if I had been restricted in my ability to participate in my children's education.

We hear out of one side of the government's mouth that participation is the lifeblood of our communities, and I absolutely support that. So perhaps, if there is a lawsuit, as I just heard, the minister could give me some details on what information she does have in that regard, because it's news to me.

**Hon. S. Bond:** I'll repeat the comment. I'm not going to comment on a case that is before the courts. It is a Charter challenge.

**J. Horgan:** Well, perhaps we'll have to find somebody who can give us some information on this. I was unaware that there had been a challenge, and I'll ask the minister again if she can tell us when this challenge was filed and who filed it.

**Hon. S. Bond:** We'll get that information. We don't have it here.

**J. Horgan:** So can I deduce from that comment that the appellant...? What level of court is it, and when was it filed? As I said, I'm unaware of it.

[1555]

**Hon. S. Bond:** I said I'd get the information, and we will do that.

**J. Horgan:** Last fall I was thoroughly impressed with the expeditious nature of the homework assignments by staff at the ministry — absolutely embarrassed other ministries across government in their ability to get information in a timely way. I'm wondering if the minister can give me any deadline on when this information will come forward.

**Hon. S. Bond:** We hope to continue that. We will do it as best we can. You should know that I did put my staff under enormous pressure to deliver last time, so I want to be reasonable this time.

**J. Horgan:** I'm sure that staff will work as they always do. I'm still waiting for information promised by

the Minister of Finance last fall. I had to wait 12 hours for the Ministry of Education. So again, I applaud the minister, her deputy and her staff for last fall. I'm hopeful that we'll be able to be as reasonable as we can.

This is a significant question though. I believe the foundation of the SPCs is under some erosion, whether it be teaching professionals who are deciding to not participate, whether it be Charter challenges to the democratic configuration of these elected positions within the School Act. This is, I believe, a reasonable line of questioning. So I'd like to stay on it if I can, mindful that the minister is not going to want to talk about matters that are before the courts — even though we don't know what courts and what the matter is. I appreciate her position on that.

With respect, then, to school planning councils that have participation of teachers in question, are all parents' positions filled across the province?

**Hon. S. Bond:** Again, certainly, the vast majority of school planning councils have parents in place. There are some communities where it is more difficult to find a parent who is willing to participate in that process because of time and a variety of other things, but the vast majority do have parents.

**J. Horgan:** That's the very issue. The minister has touched on the very issue that's of concern to my colleagues and I, and that is the time pressures that the SPCs — and, by extension, pilots in school-centred learning and other ambitious initiatives — have on the school community.

[D. Hayer in the chair.]

We've had a very difficult 12 months in the sector. The minister would acknowledge that. The challenges that I suggested in my opening remarks with respect to class size and class composition are significant. When the minister tabled her volumes of information on that subject she said quite rightly that 86 percent was a pretty good mark — and it's an "A" in most institutions. But that left 14 percent — a very, very large number of students — in classes that exceeded the School Act.

Now, I met with my DPAC and with administrators and teachers in district 62, which was not in compliance at that time. In February it's difficult to contemplate disrupting students' lives, and I think the conclusion was: "Well, let's just drift through this and do better in September." I think that's appropriate. But for the minister to say: "We're doing the best we can. We've got a majority...." That leaves me going back to those days in February when 86 percent was okay and tens of thousands of classes with five or more special needs students or 9,000 classes with 30 or more students.

Those are big numbers, and I would think that a mature government would recognize that that was a profound issue requiring resolution. I didn't hear anything about that in the minister's comments. I didn't

hear anything about that following her announcement. So again: what is a majority of SPCs with fully functioning components?

**Hon. S. Bond:** Well, I've already answered the question. The system is evolving. It is absolutely essential that we have communities discuss educational opportunities for their students. There are some districts where parents are not in place; the vast majority have parents in place. In fact, we want to continue to work to support those parents, to support those districts and to provide training opportunities. We're going to provide resources to make sure that we see school planning councils continue to evolve.

[1600]

**J. Horgan:** Again, I don't want to quibble excessively with the minister on this, but there's a fixation, I'm told, with performance measurement in the ministry. Here is something that can be measured, should be measured, and I've asked a simple question. I'd like it to be quantified rather than "a majority" and "a small minority." If the minister cannot provide the numbers to this question, could she acknowledge that and perhaps give me a time when she could get back to me with accurate numbers on these issues?

**Hon. S. Bond:** I've answered it three times. I don't have the numbers. But there also is a balancing act. The member opposite has been quite clear about how he feels about the role of the school board being autonomous and having flexibility. We're trying to find a balance here. First of all, we expect school boards to obey the law. We're also trying to see a whole new system evolve and develop through school planning councils. That takes time, and it takes patience, and that's exactly what we're going to be.

I want to say this. You know, we have a fixation on something in the ministry, and it's called helping students be successful. There are things that we measure. We measure the accountability of school districts for providing the best opportunities for our students. I'm not going to make apologies for putting student achievement at the top of our agenda.

**J. Horgan:** Nor should the minister make apologies for that, because I support it. I endorse it wholeheartedly. That wasn't what I asked. I appreciate that she has advised me a number of times now that she doesn't have the number, so I'll ask the question. When does she anticipate having that number, and when could she provide it to me and the members of the opposition?

**Hon. S. Bond:** We're going to continue to assist parents and their communities as they see school planning councils evolve. I think what's exciting is that when one works, it's absolutely phenomenal. The improvement in results.... There are schools across the province where we can demonstrate that students' reading scores have dramatically improved, and that's because a group of people who care about students sits



down and talks about how best to move an initiative forward.

I intend to continue the dialogue around how school planning councils are evolving. We have set aside money to encourage more training and opportunities, but school boards also have a responsibility to obey the law and to provide the kinds of supports that school planning councils need. So we're going to continue to monitor, we're going to continue to support, and we're going to continue to make sure that parents, teachers, educators and people who are involved in the system have the opportunity to participate.

**J. Horgan:** Let's assume for a moment that there are those that aren't watching Oprah right now and are watching the parliamentary channel, and they're wondering what the heck we're talking about. I'm wondering, then. Could the minister give me an example — a tangible example, perhaps from her district in Prince George — of what a fully functioning, successful SPC would look like in a secondary school?

**Hon. S. Bond:** School planning councils were created, in fact, to have a place where people can consult and create school growth plans. The role of school planning councils is to bring together information, to sit down and have a discussion about where the school is at currently and what kinds of goals need to be set for their students' achievement.

You know, the best example I can give you is actually an elementary school one. It happens to be Khowhemun Elementary School. The reason I can use that example is because it was used as the demo site for the webcast where 1,500 people sat and watched a completely functioning school planning council. Every member of that planning council, which included teachers, three parents and the administrator, was excited about what they were doing.

We've seen a dramatic increase — I don't have the number, but we can find it — in the percentage of reading scores in particular in that school because there was concentrated effort, partnership and buy-in. It's an absolutely outstanding example. It's the one that was shared recently on the provincial webcast.

**J. Horgan:** I would suggest the success at Khowhemun could be the fact that they have an outstanding school teacher-librarian there, who I met on School Library Day, which was postponed because of the disruption. We actually had our reading day in December at Khowhemun.

[1605]

I don't, again, doubt for a minute that with an administrator of the calibre of Charlie Coleman and the dedication of staff members like John Dryden and others at Khowhemun, their outcomes will be improving.

But as I didn't get an invite with the 15,000 others that participated in the webcast, perhaps the minister could explain in some detail who would have participated and at what level. How many parents? How many teachers? How many administrators? Were there

school trustees there? Who collects the information that is discussed? Who sets the agendas, and what's the outcome?

**Hon. S. Bond:** The agenda is set in collaboration with parents and other participants in the school planning council. It was an open webcast where school planning councils were invited to join from across the province, and that's exactly what we saw. We saw probably a thousand parents and 500 educators come together using technology. We had a demonstration team to provide the kinds of examples of things they're doing in their schools.

I just want to say, from my perspective: when a school sees its results improve, it's never the result of one initiative. It's a series of things. Of course, the school librarian or teacher-librarian would have a role to play. I would just suggest that I saw enthusiasm, incredible passion and a plan for that school that spanned not just two or three months but how we move forward. Parents are engaged in that process. Educators are engaged. It's benefiting our students. It's a great process.

Do we have some work to do? Yes, we do. But the fact of the matter is that we know it will work well for our children, and we're going to continue to make sure the resources are there to provide further training.

**J. Horgan:** Does the minister have any examples of inner-city schools in Vancouver that have successes similar to Khowhemun?

**Hon. S. Bond:** I can't speak personally about success stories in that particular part of British Columbia, but I can tell you this: we have school growth plans that demonstrate that school planning councils are working effectively. We know that students are benefiting.

The fact of the matter is that actually talking to each other about issues is a pretty important change in climate. The fact that we now embrace and endorse a parent's role in a school planning council is an important thing. We see successes all across the province. We know that it is making a difference. In fact, I've been clear that there are some areas we need to see continued improvement.

**J. Horgan:** The minister mentioned successful plans coming to her all the time. Are those documents that could be tabled with this committee?

**Hon. S. Bond:** We'd be happy to share some examples of the school growth plans. In addition to that, the school accountability contracts are all on the website.

**J. Horgan:** We have accountability contracts front and centre. There are 60 districts. Can the minister advise what the objectives of the various accountability contracts are? I understand that they are homogenous.

[1610]

**Hon. S. Bond:** Well, in fact, they're not homogenous. They certainly have some commonality, but one

would expect there to be. We've asked school districts to focus on student achievement, and some components of that are common to all districts. Accountability contracts build on a number of things. Each contract builds on the progress that has been made during the past school year, and it plans for the years ahead.

What they do, in fact, is look at their strengths and look at where they need to improve. They set goals and look at targets for improving student achievement. When they do that, accountability contracts take into consideration both provincial and local information. We also know that there is a connection between the contracts, school plans and between aboriginal enhancement agreements, so it's a very collaborative process and builds on progress from one year to the next.

**J. Horgan:** I believe social responsibility is one of the objectives that appears regularly. How do you quantify social responsibility? It strikes me that that's pretty subjective, and I'm wondering, if you're measuring something subjective, how you're doing that.

**Hon. S. Bond:** Certainly, social responsibility is a key component in accountability contracts. We don't grade accountability contracts or reference them against each other. We know that districts have unique sets of circumstances. We expect it to be a component in accountability contracts. It's different in different school districts. Some choose to prioritize and focus on particular elements, so they're not the same. They're very different, but there are areas of commonality and expectation, and certainly, social responsibility is one of them.

**J. Horgan:** Can the minister provide this committee with some of the identified objectives of a handful of accountability contracts? I think we'll find that when we do that, they're very similar.

**Hon. S. Bond:** We don't have the accountability contracts with us, as you can imagine. There are 60 of them. They are on the website, and it's a matter of simply looking them up. We can look for some examples for a later date, but at this point, they're on the website and, certainly, reflect the uniqueness of the districts in the province.

**J. Horgan:** My perusal highlighted for me not so much uniqueness but consistency of objectives. I guess one could argue — I'm not necessarily doing that now — if everyone has the same objectives, then it should be pretty easy to achieve. If they're all the same, why would you need 60 of them?

**Hon. S. Bond:** As I suggest, when you're talking about improving student achievement, there are some things you're going to focus on. You're right: 100 percent of the boards have literacy goals. We wouldn't be surprised by that. In fact, that's what one of the foundations is. So 78 percent have goals on early literacy, 77

percent on late literacy and 83 percent on intermediate literacy. Some 70 percent of the boards have numeracy goals.

Districts design their accountability plans according to the needs of their students, and yes, there are some areas of commonality, but in fact, they choose to prioritize them in different ways. There are a number of different ways of addressing those issues, so while the goal might be the same in many districts, the path they choose to get there is often very different. We've given you a sample of what some of those goals would look like across accountability contracts.

[1615]

**J. Horgan:** That's exactly my point, and I'm glad we've gotten to it. My review showed me three. Some were first, some were second, and some were third. It was literacy, numeracy, social responsibility — all laudable goals and, as I would suggest and the minister agrees, the foundation of the public school system.

If that's the case, is there not a more efficient way to manage those three key priority areas than to devolve decision-making, solution-finding and measurement to districts or, ultimately, to schools? What's the positive outcome of all having the same objectives administered in different ways?

**Hon. S. Bond:** I'm actually kind of surprised by the question. I mean, there are no two classrooms in this province that are the same. There are certainly no two school districts. I happen to come from a rural, northern district. What's the best possible way to actually provide information and opportunities for our students? It's to allow districts and, in fact, schools to talk about what's best for their kids.

I'm not at all supportive of centralizing the kinds of plans that actually allow for unique and individual classroom decision-making. The closer to the classroom the decision-making is done, the better it is for our students.

**J. Horgan:** I will not quarrel with the minister on that. My point — and what I've been advised of as I've been travelling around the province — is that the collection of data that's sent to Victoria and warehoused on a monster computer somewhere or put in a filing cabinet in the back corner of the sixth floor — that's the troubling part. It's not that districts or schools are given flexibility to deal with their unique challenges. They do that every day regardless of what we say in this place and the extent of the debate on this particular issue.

The challenge is: "Why are we collecting this data? What are you doing with it when you get it? Why don't you just let us take the problems as we see them and solve them?" That's the challenge. Why collect all this data, particularly this objective data?

**Hon. S. Bond:** First of all, we're on the record as being big-time in favour of not having one-size-fits-all solutions. We're also big-time in favour of having, as a government, accountability to the people who elect us

and the taxpayers who support a \$5 billion system. We actually think it's important that that information be made available to people who want to understand the system better. I think having an accountability contract that's been created uniquely by school boards — yes, they use the same principles — and actually making that information public is a great thing.

**J. Horgan:** Perhaps, then, we'll go back to the data collection. What advantage is there, in a school that's strapped and stressed with burgeoning class sizes, composition issues, dealing with special needs, learning challenges, social issues at home...? What benefit is there to the administrator at that school, juggling as many balls as the administrator has to, collecting data to send to you so that you can keep it in a file cabinet on the sixth floor? What's the benefit to the school?

**Hon. S. Bond:** Accountability contracts aren't about sending data to the Ministry of Education. Accountability contracts are about looking at and examining data thoroughly. The reason you do that, and the reason you collect the information and create the accountability contract, is so you shape the plan based on the best information and evidence that you have.

The collection of the data is one extra press of the button that takes the finished document which will shape the school district and the school. The whole process is about benefiting students. It's not about sending information anywhere. It doesn't sit on the sixth floor. It actually goes on the website.

**J. Horgan:** Well, I'm certainly comforted to know that it's on the website. That's going to comfort all those people who don't have access to that information. Or when they do find leisure time to surf the Net, they're not looking for accountability data from Pouce Coupe; they're doing other stuff. If administrators....

Interjection.

**J. Horgan:** No disrespect to the member's constituency.

**The Chair:** Order.

**J. Horgan:** I fully respect every square inch of Peace River South.

If administrators and teachers and others in the district are collecting this information, that means they're not doing something else. The minister's comment that it's just pushing a button.... Boy, oh boy, if I could have a dollar for every time I've said, "It's just pushing a button," and then the person responsible for collecting the data, entering it and then pushing the button frowned at me, I'd be a rich man.

[1620]

My question, then, is to the minister. I know she doesn't truly believe that it's just pushing a button. Collecting this data takes time. I'm certain that once it arrives by e-mail at headquarters, lots of thought and effort is put into shaping it and moving some letters

around and then pushing more buttons. But what about the work that's not being done on the ground to solve real problems in schools right across this province? Why not let the administrators do their jobs without reporting back to you?

**Hon. S. Bond:** First of all, let's clarify my comments absolutely and for the record. The push of the button was actually after the work had been done. So I want to make that perfectly clear to the member opposite. That was not meant to at all reflect the work that's been done. The push of the button was simply that that is part of the final process.

I'm stunned by the comments of the member opposite. We actually need to plan. The suggestion that administrators should be doing something else because they could be.... Well, I actually think that being thoughtful and careful about results and data, so we actually understand where our children are, in fact helps inform what brings improvement for every single child in British Columbia.

It's not a matter of tediously inputting data, and I wasn't meaning to imply that. The member knows that well. In fact, his initial comments about the tenor in here.... That is also my comment here. My job today is to provide answers to the questions that are brought to the table, but I did not for one second imply that there wasn't a great degree of work and effort put into accountability contracts. In fact, that is right and proper. We actually need a plan, and children need planning. You simply don't pluck ideas out of thin air.

I guess the really disappointing part of this discussion is that accountability contracts are in place to focus district attention and to focus resources on student achievement. Parents have said to us as recently as Saturday that our number-one goal is student achievement. That actually takes thought and work and planning, and it is paying off.

**J. Horgan:** I would say that collecting data is not the solution to better outcomes. More resources in the classroom is the solution to better outcomes — more teachers, more teacher assistants, more teacher-librarians, more counsellors. That's what's going to get you better outcomes. Collecting data, trying to reinvent wheels and calling them Liberal wheels instead of Conservative wheels or New Democratic wheels — that's not the solution.

There was a public school system in this province before 2001 that was doing just fine. It's doing just fine now, despite our best efforts to screw it up — on both sides. The challenge is getting people into the classroom so that these students, who are not just numbers that get input and sent to Victoria, have the resources they need.

Let's move off of the accountability for a time and talk about class size and class composition. Does the minister think it is acceptable to have 9,000 classrooms with 30 or more students in them?

**The Chair:** I will just remind members to use parliamentary language in this House, please.

**Hon. S. Bond:** Let's talk about resources in classrooms. Funding levels are at record highs in the province of British Columbia. We can stand and try to debate that, but that's the fact. Enrolment has dropped by 37,000 students over the last number of years. Completion rates in this province are at the highest level ever — 79 percent for non-aboriginal students. We have 48 percent for aboriginal students and 82 percent for ESL students.

That means something's working. I simply will not talk about how the system has been influenced. In fact, we've seen unbelievable improvement, and that's not because of governments. In fact, it is because of great work that's done in classrooms every single day in this province, and we're going to continue to do that. You know, to suggest that we need resources in classrooms....

The per-pupil funding is at the highest level it's ever been at in this province. I made it very clear. For the first time in British Columbia we actually have class-size data to talk about, and it is not as simplistic an argument as the member opposite makes. There are different views about how we view and deal with class size and composition in this province.

In fact, it was parents in this province who came and said that rigid formulas and magic numbers don't work. We responded to that. Are there challenges? Yes, there are. That dialogue is ongoing. If the member opposite chooses to listen to one voice about that, one particular loud voice, then that may be his choice. But in fact, there are different views about the issue of class size and composition. We've said we're going to have that discussion, and that's precisely what we're doing.

**J. Horgan:** Can I conclude that the minister believes it's acceptable to have 9,000 classes with 30 or more students in them?

[1625]

**Hon. S. Bond:** What the member opposite can conclude is the fact that every single class is different in the province. In a school that I visited recently, a teacher said to me: "I can have 30 kids in my class, and I can manage that. Or I can have 24 children in my class, and it makes it hard to come to work the next day." That's because it depends on the skill set of the children, it depends on which children are in that class, and it also depends on the skill set of the teacher in front of that classroom.

We're simply saying this: we need a system that allows for decision-making closer to the classroom so that those decisions can be made taking every child's needs and circumstances and looking at that, and making sure that the decision is made with students at the centre.

**J. Horgan:** Does the minister believe that five or more special needs students in a classroom is acceptable without accompanying resources to manage that challenge?

**Hon. S. Bond:** Certainly, there would be additional resources in classrooms with five special needs chil-

dren in them. Once again, it's the same principle as the principle we talk about when we talk about class size. Children don't come in class-size packages. What we need to do is have a system that reflects that. We need to have the ability for people to sit down to talk about unique and individual needs, because you know, there just might be a class where 31 will work. That depends on the children and the teacher and the dialogue that takes place. But that takes a process; that takes a willingness to sit down and talk about that.

I don't support the fact that there were schools previous to this where siblings were separated because we had a number and we said: "Well, you know what? Your child happens to be the one that is right above that number." That meant their child had to be bussed to another school. I don't support that model either.

**J. Horgan:** I think if the Minister of Health were here, he would be able to comment on whether it was acceptable to separate family members in the last years of their lives. But let's go back to the example that the minister used. Can she give me a number of how many brothers and sisters were separated to go to different schools as a result of class-size rearrangement at the start of the school year?

[K. Whittred in the chair.]

**Hon. S. Bond:** In fact, we don't have specific numbers. I'm not even sure exactly what the question was that the member opposite asked, but we know this: the system now allows educators to come together with decision-making tools that allow them to choose how you create a class at the school level. That's the principle that we believe in. We think it might be best to actually look at who the children are, who the teacher is, and make sure that we're putting together a class that best suits the needs.

You know what else is important? You also need to have the flexibility. If your child is number 31 for physics and you need it to graduate or you choose it to graduate, we want to actually have a system that responds to those student needs. In fact, the system that's in place now does allow for that. We are currently in discussions about the challenges that are faced in classrooms across this province. There has been no consensus about how to move forward with that.

**J. Horgan:** Is the minister suggesting that prior to 2002 there were rampant disruptions in schools across the province if there were 31 students who chose to take physics to complete their grade 12? Is that the suggestion the minister is making — that somehow everything went to hell in a handbasket in September if the numbers within the contracts weren't complied with? What was the clamour to do away with those language provisions in the contract in 2002?

[1630]

**Hon. S. Bond:** One of the issues that was clear at that point in time was that parents had come.... As a

matter of fact, resolutions for numerous years from BCCPAC actually asked for there to be flexibility and choice built into the system.

Secondly, we had a more challenging situation at secondary schools providing choice. In fact, there were numerous examples of lack of choice and children being moved to other schools. That was one of the factors that was considered. But most importantly, people said to us: "We want this to be done in a different way so we can better serve the needs of students." And that's what we did.

**J. Horgan:** Just who said that? The minister just said that people said that. Who were those people? And how many were they in their number?

**Hon. S. Bond:** We've had administrators that said it, we had principals that said it, and we had parents that said it — in fact, with resolutions suggesting we needed some flexibility. Many parents today continue to say the same thing — that there is no magic number. "We want a system that allows us to look at the needs of our students."

**J. Horgan:** Well, I'll save the minister making reference to the member for Victoria-Beacon Hill, who was also one of those who said that not all classes are created equal. I don't think for a minute that all classes are created equal. That really wasn't my question.

I guess what I would like to do today.... Maybe we can take a bit of a step back here for a moment, because we're getting testy. Maybe it's the time and me hopping on one foot.

It wasn't really, really broken in 2002. It didn't require radical surgery. I do agree with the minister that not every class is the same. Not every student is the same. Not every level of expertise within the teaching profession is the same.

The challenge that we all have, and the minister foremost among us in this room, is addressing what is a public perception — and, I believe, a real one — that there are excessively large classes today, regardless of the minister's good wishes. There are excessively large classes with inordinate numbers of special needs students, regardless of the minister's desire that that not be so.

My question to her is: how do you think we really solve this problem? Let's take a step back and say that we have a round table that doesn't act as a decision-making body. We come together — some players in the system — and have a discussion. But what's the solution? If the minister didn't like it in contract language, what's her solution?

**Hon. S. Bond:** We've already suggested the solution. We actually thought it was so important that we put it in legislation. In fact, the reality of this is that we fundamentally believe that students should be at the centre of this discussion. The way you put students at the centre of this discussion is that you actually sit down and consider what their unique needs are and

what the skill set of the teacher might be in that particular classroom.

It's about community. It's about discussion. It's about dialogue. We have already, in class-size legislation.... We have primary classes that are in legislation. In fact, we put it in legislation. That's how important it was.

**J. Horgan:** The minister thought it was so important to have school planning councils that they put it in legislation, but they don't monitor it. They can't tell us, in this committee, how many are functioning. So I think it rings a bit hollow to those watching at home, and maybe even to some of the members watching here in the committee, that it's the most important thing in the world that we address this issue, based on the comments that the minister just made.

I know that she's sincere about this. I know that if a child is going to be the centre of the system.... That male or female student in a class with 32 or 33 others — if he or she doesn't have an assertive personality, if he or she is quiet and kind of blends into the carpet, he or she might not be as successful. How does the minister address those issues? It's not collected in data. It's individual kids in the classroom with teachers.

**Hon. S. Bond:** Well, I'm assuming that people who are professionals in the education system, who know far better than me — and, I would hate to suggest, than the member opposite.... He'd have to make that comment himself. They're in the best position to make that decision. They're in the best position to assess that child's needs, to assess who needs to be in the classroom, what resources....

We actually think — imagine that — that we should put kids at the centre of this. We should put students at the centre and allow people who have expertise to make the decisions about unique and individual classrooms.

**J. Horgan:** Do you think that 38,000 members of the B.C. Teachers Federation would have walked out of their classes if they didn't think this was a significant issue, an important issue — not to themselves, but to the students that are at the centre of our education system?

[1635]

**Hon. S. Bond:** First of all, no one in this room — or anyone, ever — has suggested that class size and composition are not important. We simply have a different view of how you design the optimum learning conditions, and this is about learning conditions. This is about students at the centre of this discussion. No one has suggested it's not important. In fact, it's critical to what we do. We just believe that there's a process that allows for that to be done which includes parents in that decision-making, which includes administrators and, most importantly, classroom teachers in a discussion about what's best for students. I'm not sure how that's objectionable to the member opposite.

**J. Horgan:** What's objectionable to this member is an inability of the government to acknowledge that there's a problem. It's not the end of the world if the minister stands up and says: "We have a significant crisis with respect to class composition in British Columbia. We have a significant crisis with respect to class size."

These are fundamental issues. I will applaud the minister if, when I sit down, she stands up and says: "This is the fundamental challenge of my term as minister, and I'm going to devote all of my time and energy to that outcome."

**Hon. S. Bond:** The fundamental responsibility and challenge is to make sure that our students succeed, and there are a variety of issues that need to be considered. I would like to remind the member opposite — because we do need to look at results, as uncomfortable as that might be — that we actually need to remember that students in British Columbia are the best in the world, bar none. They are outperforming many and most other countries. In fact, with the circumstances over the last number of years, our students have higher completion rates than they've ever had in this province.

Does that mean our work is done? Of course not. We have a number of things to consider. Class size and composition are part of that discussion, but our primary responsibility is to look at how we help every child succeed. Those are two of the components we need to address.

**J. Horgan:** Perhaps the minister could inventory those other components.

**Hon. S. Bond:** Where does the list end and begin? We have to have safe, healthy and caring schools, first of all, where students feel safe and comfortable in their learning environment. We need to address the issue of health and fitness, because we know that children actually perform better when they're healthy and have a proper diet. We know that parental involvement is critical to children's success. In fact, every report will tell you that if a parent is involved, a child does better. All of those things.... Professional development across the spectrum for our support workers, for our teachers.

There is a list a mile long of factors that go into providing resources that make children successful. Class size and composition are critical components on that list as well.

**J. Horgan:** Earlier in the minister's comments, she made the comment that you can't legislate behaviour, with respect to — I think it was — fruits and vegetables and other healthy choices. I agree with that. I'm not certain that....

I remember a discussion I had with the member for Vancouver-Burrard on his private member's bill, and as much as I support what the minister has just said with respect to ensuring that children feel safe in their schools, one of the repercussions of government policy has been a reduction in the number of counsellors

available in schools. With that one objective that was articulated by the minister — that being safety in the schools — how does that objective get accomplished when you reduce the number of counsellors available — teacher-counsellor ratios?

**Hon. S. Bond:** Once again, we believe the best place to make a decision about that is at the school level. The school community best understands the students that are in it. Certainly, people who live in Victoria and work in government don't know every classroom, don't know every set of circumstances. What we want to do is provide resources to schools and to districts to say to them: "You know your students. You know your school. You know your circumstances. We're going to do our best to keep giving you record-level funding."

That's exactly what we're doing. We want to give tools and resources to make sure that students are best served. We fundamentally believe that those decisions should be made at unique and individual levels in districts and closer to the classroom.

[1640]

**J. Horgan:** The lift for the public component of K-to-12 was about 2.3 percent. The lift for private schools was 10 percent. Can the minister reconcile that?

**Hon. S. Bond:** Well, obviously, when the public school portion of the per-pupil funding goes up, the independent school portion goes up. There is a smaller enrolment; the percentage is higher. But there is also increased enrolment in private schools.

**J. Horgan:** So we've got increased enrolment in the private system. We've got decreased enrolment in the public system.

I'm reminded of *Island Parent Magazine*. I know some of your staff would have had access to that. I don't know if it makes its way to Prince George or to North Vancouver. It's an outstanding little publication here on the Island, and each year their summer edition is loaded up with advertisements from private schools in the south Island, marketing their product to potential students.

I had to smile when the minister said that class size is only one factor. Yet it was a significant enough factor that it was named in every single advertisement, from St. Michaels to Glenlyon to Brentwood College to Shownigan Lake. Every single one of the advertisements said "small class sizes." My question, then, to the minister is.... If the private sector sees this as a marketing tool, maybe we're on to something here, and perhaps we can start marketing the public system by saying "small class sizes."

**Hon. S. Bond:** What we're going to market is the fact that we have sizes that are designed around student needs, and we're going to talk about how we do that. We're also going to market the fact that we want parents to be involved in that decision-making.

The most important thing we're going to talk about is what an absolutely astounding system we have, how incredible it is that, with the circumstances we have today — and they're going to continue to improve as we see core funding continue to rise and enrolment continue to drop — we have outstanding results in the public school system. I'm proud of the system we have. We're going to see parents continue to choose to be part of the public school system because they know that teachers work hard, they're excellent at what they do, and the results demonstrate that.

**J. Horgan:** I'm just hopeful that we don't get too many people switching to *Oprah* here.

Interjection.

**J. Horgan:** Well, thanks for that, hon. minister.

The question was: why would the private sector market small class sizes — use that as a marketing tool? Why wouldn't we, then, as public administrators, see the advantage of this and take steps to reduce class sizes?

**Hon. S. Bond:** Actually, parents choose private schools for a number of reasons. In fact, they make choices, and we support the ability of parents to make choices in the public and private school systems. We know they choose private schools for a variety of reasons, and we support those choices that parents choose to make.

Our job is to continue to make sure that resources are in the public school system. They're there at record levels, and in fact, as I've suggested, per-pupil funding will continue to rise over the next number of years, and we will see enrolment continue to decline because of the demographics.

**J. Horgan:** And with those demographics, why would private sector enrolment be going up?

**Hon. S. Bond:** Parents choose the educational path for their children for a variety of reasons. Parents choose, perhaps, a religious school for their children to attend because those are the values that they share and that are important to them. They also may choose a Montessori school. There's a variety of options in the private system, and parents make those choices for a number of different reasons.

[1645]

**J. Horgan:** Well, I certainly have confidence in the public system. I've kept my children in it, and I will continue to do that. The reason I bring up the issue.... I don't dispute the minister's response that choice is a factor in all decisions that we make as consumers. If you were going to commodify education, then you would consume what you thought was in the best interest of your children.

Leaving aside religious instruction, however, there are a number of private institutions across the province — not religious institutions — that are getting increasing numbers of students to enrol because they are mar-

keting smaller class sizes. The assumption that parents are making is that their children will have more attention, more access to resources than they do in the public system. That strikes me as a marketing challenge, and instead of focusing my attentions on repurposing school boards or on school-based planning, I would try and find a way to sell the whole system to all of the participants across the board.

Again, why would it be that private sector institutions are marketing class size as a desirable attribute of their system and yet we won't acknowledge that it's a problem?

**Hon. S. Bond:** We have, first of all, said that class size and composition is important. Actually, we were the first government that decided to collect the scope of data that we have collected. We know that parents make choices about where they send their children for a number of reasons.

When you look at outcomes, I simply have to continue to remind the member opposite that we have an outstanding public education system. Our students are amongst the best in the world, and parents every day celebrate the successes that their children receive in terms of education and opportunity in this system, and they will continue to support the public education system.

We also believe that a parent has a right to choose, and we look forward to opportunities for students in a variety of ways in this province, because that's important too. We're going to continue to look at enhancing opportunities within the public system, but we're also going to be strong supporters of choice.

**J. Horgan:** A 2.3-percent lift for public schools and a 10-percent lift for private schools. The minister gave me an answer. I'll ask her to give it to me again, and this time perhaps with a view to speak to those parents and those stakeholders who have contacted me, concerned that it gives the impression that this government is more supportive of some choices than of others.

**Hon. S. Bond:** We will do the math again. The per-pupil funding goes up. When it goes up, it goes up simultaneously in the independent school funding. As a result of that, the percentage is somewhat skewed because of the size of the group. We also need to look.... When the member opposite talks about increasing enrolment, we see that over the past five years independent school enrolment has averaged an increase of about 1.3 percent.

We support choice not only in terms of a parent's right to choose a private education; we absolutely embrace choice in the public system as well. In fact, within the public school system in British Columbia there are 5,000 different opportunities for parents to choose from in terms of things that they can look at. It's on our website. We incorporate and embrace choice both on the public and on the private side.

**J. Horgan:** Could the minister articulate for me the per-pupil funding for the private system?

**Hon. S. Bond:** Group one schools receive 50 percent of their local public school district's per-student operating grant. Group two schools receive 35 percent.  
[1650]

**J. Horgan:** Then I can say confidently to parents in my district that there's no preference given by this ministry to funding of private schools, that the per-pupil funding is the same 50 percent for one group, 35 percent for another?

**Hon. S. Bond:** In fact, private schools have been funded in British Columbia long before the Liberal government became the government. The funding formula has not changed, so one would suggest that if the practice has been in place, we think, since 1989, the Independent School Act actually set out the regulations. There is nothing that has changed other than, I point out, the funding for special education students in the independent school system. But other than that, this is a policy and a practice that's been in place since 1989.

**J. Horgan:** Perhaps the minister could discuss the changes to the special needs funding within the private system.

**Hon. S. Bond:** Up until this point, special education students in the private system received 50 percent funding, as other students did. We now fund special needs students at 100 percent in independent schools, because we care about their needs being met in that way in that system as well.

**J. Horgan:** What was the budget lift to achieve that increase from 50 percent to 100 percent?

**Hon. S. Bond:** Eight million dollars.

**J. Horgan:** Let's go back to the class size and class composition issue for a moment and particularly to the round table. When does the minister expect to table anything meaningful coming from those discussions so that the public can have some sense that resolution is at hand?

**Hon. S. Bond:** I just want to clarify too. I'm just reading this, and I want to make sure I get this correct. It says in this latest document: "Since 1993-1994, group one and two independent schools continue to receive 50 percent and 35 percent of the operating grant." So it's been since 1993-1994. The Independent School Act was created in 1989, but funding was in place in the middle of the previous government's mandate.

You know, the discussions at the round table have been complex, and I'm not going to pretend anything else. They've been very challenging, and one of the reasons they're challenging is because there's not one opinion there. There are actually a number of opinions, and they are very diverse, and in fact, they actually disagree. We are continuing to be hopeful that we can

work together with the group to find some solutions or some suggestions to the class size and composition issues. That dialogue is going to continue, and we're going to keep working at it, but to suggest that there is an answer.... That's not the case at the round table.

**J. Horgan:** So we should not expect a solution through the round table process to this issue?

**Hon. S. Bond:** I didn't say that, actually. What I said was that there is complex discussion ongoing and that we would continue to work to find some consensus, but I can assure you of this. There are a number of voices, each of which is very passionate about what their views and values and beliefs are. There is no easy answer, and we're going to continue to work at it.

Half the challenge there is trying to repair damaged relationships, where there's been no conversation for a very long time. In fact, that began a decade ago, where we haven't had one successful contract negotiated by the B.C. Teachers Federation. We've said we're going to continue to spend time and energy working at the round table, because it's about building relationship and it's about finding consensus.

**J. Horgan:** I know staff will be able to advise the minister that in 1998 there was an agreement between the government and the BCTF. It was the BCSTA that had difficulty with it.

**Hon. S. Bond:** It wasn't negotiated.

[1655]

**J. Horgan:** Class size and class composition language was put into the contract at that time in lieu of wage increases, and it was ratified by the BCTF. But we can carry on from there.

If, as I've been led to believe, the round table is not a decision-making body, at what time will the minister — the ultimate responsibility in this issue...? At what point will the minister say: "We've talked enough. I've heard enough. I'm going to make a decision"?

**Hon. S. Bond:** I'm going to continue to be optimistic about the round table and work hard. I don't have an arbitrary deadline that says we're going to decide by two weeks from Tuesday, and we've made that clear at the round table. We're still trying to sort out how people can actually converse with each other. To be very candid, that challenge isn't always between government and partners. It's actually between partners.

There are some struggles and strains as people get the chance to express their views. There's one very clear view, and there are some that aren't quite as clear and not being heard as loudly. So there are challenges there, and everyone has been very upfront about that, including all the partners at the table.

The good news, from my perspective, is that we're still at the table. It is giving us an opportunity to have some very challenging discussions about issues that really matter to everyone at the table. Class size mat-



ters to parents and trustees and support staff. All of the people in the system care about class size. They just have different views about how we should manage building those classes, and that's evident at the round table.

**J. Horgan:** Does the minister have a view on what her solution would be for the issue?

**Hon. S. Bond:** I think I've tried to make clear what we believe is important about class size. We believe that decisions made in collaboration with the people who are at the school level and at the district level are absolutely essential to how we make the best decisions for students in this province, and we believe that fundamentally.

What we're saying is that we need to have a place and a way to have that discussion. We need to look at the issues that are in front of us around class size and composition. Are there things we need to do? Are there things we need to look at? That's the dialogue we're having. No one has had it for a very long time in this province, so we want to have that discussion. I want to have students at its centre, and in our view as a government, we believe the best way to do that is to make sure all of the partners have a role to play in the discussion.

**J. Horgan:** But not support workers?

**Hon. S. Bond:** We made a decision at the beginning of the round table process that did not see support workers sitting at that table, and we've had much discussion about that since. In fact, there were representations made to the table to consider whether or not we should expand the membership, and there was very passionate discussion about that.

At the end of the day a consensus was reached at the round table that we would keep the remaining membership for a year, and we would re-evaluate it at that point in time. In the meantime, we would encourage groups to come and present to the round table, and that is still part of the plan we have.

We also have another place that people.... There is another group, the educational advisory committee, which has a much, much broader membership, and certainly, the issue of CUPE membership at the table was discussed. There was a consensus reached after some very challenging debate about that — that we would, in fact, leave the membership the same for one year and re-evaluate at that time.

**J. Horgan:** When was the last time the educational advisory committee met?

[H. Bloy in the chair.]

**Hon. S. Bond:** The educational advisory committee met in February, and it will meet again in April.

**J. Horgan:** Could the minister advise, although there wasn't consensus, what the position of the gov-

ernment of British Columbia was with respect to CUPE's participation?

**Hon. S. Bond:** I think that's fairly self-evident. We struck the group in the first place and had much discussion about it afterward, deciding what was best with other round-table members. One of the challenges we found was that we wanted to have a group that was intimate enough to have meaningful discussion and meaningful dialogue.

From our perspective, we wanted to make sure we had a broad enough group to have participation, but we also wanted to make sure it was small enough to have the kind of meaningful dialogue that needed to take place. As I've said, we certainly had a discussion about this at the round table.

[1700]

We want to make sure there's an avenue for support workers to participate by presenting. Certainly, in my visits I'm working very hard to have them included in the discussions that take place in those districts.

**J. Horgan:** In my discussions teaching assistants are integral to addressing some of the composition questions that are before the round table and are certainly being debated in the broader public. Many of those are CUPE members. Again, if those are the two issues — class size and class composition — it strikes me that the appropriate position for the government of British Columbia would have been to include those individuals. Can I assume that there was no consensus, that they haven't been invited, that it was the position of the government of British Columbia that they be excluded?

**Hon. S. Bond:** In fact, as I pointed out, we created the round table in the first place with the membership that exists today. We did, however, engage in a discussion about what the membership should look like, and that was certainly as a result of there being some concern expressed by some of the round-table members. We should also point out that there were lists of other partners that wanted to be included in the round table as well, so it certainly wasn't unique.

I do recognize the significant role that support staff workers play across the system. As I suggested to the member opposite, we have agreed to leave the membership at the place it is, and we will re-evaluate that in a year.

**J. Horgan:** We talked a bit about the students being the centre of this entire discussion. I can remember being a student at Reynolds High School. I can remember when I was in grade eight — just the age of some of the Reynolds High School Pages that we have here at the Legislature — I was called to the office. I was petrified. I didn't show up, and I found out later on that it was to be a Page here. It was unfortunate; I probably would have enjoyed passing out water to the folks as much as the new kids do.

At the time, Mrs. Loudon and Mrs. Bastien were support workers in the office at Reynolds High School.

To a 12-year-old kid just pushed into the big school with all the other guys, they were an integral part of the system, as far as I could tell. They were teachers, as far as I could tell. They were adults, people of authority in the school community, and as a student I looked up to them with the same deference and respect I did the administrator, the vice-principal and the educators.

If we are not talking about silos and beating up unions, then maybe we're talking about including all the people so that we do get the well-rounded perspective that I know the minister wants. Why not include those people now in the round table?

**Hon. S. Bond:** In discussing this, again, I have said clearly that we will look to the future. It was a consensus reached by the round-table members that we need to have an opportunity to continue to do this work. We will re-evaluate a year from what was the beginning of that process.

There are other options as well, as I've pointed out, for participation in the Education Advisory Council. Certainly in my visits I make every attempt to meet with CUPE workers and others that are involved. I think it's important that we recognize the challenge we have at this table. As I pointed out, there was discussion about this, and we will re-evaluate after a year.

**J. Horgan:** Was class size or class composition discussed at the February meeting of the Education Advisory Council?

**Hon. S. Bond:** I wasn't at the educational advisory committee meeting, but I've been assured that yes, it was brought up, and it was brought up by a member of the B.C. Teachers Federation.

**J. Horgan:** Are agendas and minutes from EACs available on the website?

**Hon. S. Bond:** They are not on the website, but they are sent and returned to all the partner groups that participate.

**J. Horgan:** Could the minister table the February meeting agenda?

[1705]

**Hon. S. Bond:** We'd be happy to table it. We obviously don't have it here with us at this moment, but we'd be happy to table the agenda. We should point out that class size and composition was not on the agenda at EAC. It was brought up by the BCTF rep at the meeting.

**J. Horgan:** Does EAC meet monthly? Quarterly?

**Hon. S. Bond:** The intent is monthly. Occasionally there are not a significant number of agenda items, so they combine an agenda. For example, there was not one in March, as I understand it, but we are moving ahead to have one in April.

**J. Horgan:** Was there one in November, December or January?

**Hon. S. Bond:** We'll confirm the schedule, but certainly, our collective understanding, behind me, is that probably September, October and November — yes. Not one in December, and not one in March, but all of the other months.

**J. Horgan:** I'm thinking not October as well, but that might have just been me. There was a disruption — hon. Chair, you'll remember — in October that kind of had everyone at odds.

Again, I appreciate that the minister is grappling with a diversity of stakeholders that have a diversity of opinions on a range of subjects. Ultimately, the decision-making will end up falling to her as the minister responsible, and executive council will deliberate, and decisions will be made. I am fully conversant in the decision-making process at this stage.

What I'm concerned about is that a significant portion of the system is not represented. The minister said they'll review that in a year. That leads me to be somewhat concerned that we may not have significant resolution to this issue in the next 12 months. Again, it's important to me. It's important to my colleagues. It's important to parents that I talk to. It's certainly important to the Teachers Federation and to CUPE representatives. When will class size and class composition get to the top of this minister's list of initiatives that she will undertake in the next short period of time?

**Hon. S. Bond:** Serving students well in this province and making sure that they have the opportunity to succeed is at the top of this minister's agenda every single day. Class size and composition are components of that discussion. We've worked and will continue to work hard to sort out how best to address those issues.

I am eager to have the round table continue to have that discussion. I am having it as we travel around the province. But you know, when I visit school districts, they bring up other issues as well, and it's important for those to be considered. We're going to keep students and their achievement and individual successes at the top of our agenda, and we will continue to make sure that class size and composition are key components of that discussion.

**J. Horgan:** Has there been any district that the minister has visited that hasn't raised the issue of class size and class composition?

**Hon. S. Bond:** It's brought up to varying degrees in different ways in different parts of the province. I hear about it when I visit districts. Of course I do. There's a pretty public discussion about class size and composition going on. There's also a really greatly organized structure that's making sure that that issue is certainly heard across the province. So yes, I hear about it. I hear about it to differing degrees.

You know what? Probably one of the most profound ways I've heard about it was the way a teacher described it to me: "I can teach a class of 30 depending upon who's in it, but I can teach a class of 24 and it can come with severe challenges." Those are the kinds of comments.

**J. Horgan:** That, to you, speaks to a need to address composition. Again, they seem to be going in tandem.

I don't disagree. I look at the classes that I was in, in a different time. I'm certainly aware that others of my generation and beyond... I see the member for Nelson-Creston. The world was a different place. The challenges and stresses on educators, the challenges and stresses on parents, on children — radically different from when we were in the system.

[1710]

I don't want the minister to take too much umbrage at this, but it is the only issue that dominates the discussions that I've been having. I've been going to the same places that the minister has, so I do hear about other issues. I hear concerns about rural classes and rural schools — the challenges that they face. The funding formula, as the member would know — from the north — creates challenges of its own.

But what I hear first and foremost at the beginning, the middle and the end in discussions with trustees, with teachers and with parents is that they're very concerned about this fundamental issue of what's going on within the classroom. I believe the minister when she says that the student is at the centre of her agenda. But it's got to be more than just rhetoric, and that's the challenge that I throw down again for the minister.

If she would stand in this place today and say, "That's the number-one issue I'm going to put all of my resources... I'm going to devote the entire energies of the Ministry of Education to solving this problem," she'd have my applause and the applause of my colleagues on this side of the House.

Will the minister take the time now to stand in her place and say: "This is a fundamental issue, and I'm going to be working on it day after day after day until I've got a resolution"? September would be a reasonable target for that, I would think.

**Hon. S. Bond:** The fundamental issue that we're going to concentrate on is student success and student achievement. There are a number of things that we need to look at when we do that. We're going to make sure B.C. students continue to be the best in the world. We're going to make sure that we continue to work on seeing our completion rates grow again, at the highest level that they have in this province. As I said, I don't need to repeat the numbers again.

I can tell you this. We're going to continue on focusing and making sure that British Columbia has the best education system it can possibly have. We have to look at a number of things to ensure that, and class size and composition will be amongst other things that we consider.

**J. Horgan:** Does a 25-percent reduction in teacher-librarians equate to better outcomes for literacy in our school system?

**Hon. S. Bond:** What we believe is that schools have to make choices about what's best to serve their students in this province. I actually have confidence in educators and administrators and parents and teachers working together to determine how best to serve those students. We know that they make decisions better when they're closer to the classroom, looking at their unique students and their unique circumstances. We fundamentally believe that's the way for us to manage the system.

**C. Evans:** I'll take over and ask a few questions and provide a moment of relief for the critic. I have questions on a couple of topics, a little bit about the cost of heating fuel and school bus transportation fuel for rural districts. Primarily my questions are a follow-up to last fall's discussions with the minister on the subject of the independent schools at Bountiful.

On the first item. I have met twice now with all five of the school districts that run from Boundary to Golden. In every case they are increasingly concerned about their ability to transport students and to keep schools warm should fuel costs continue to rise. My first question would be: can the minister tell me if she has plans for funding fuel costs to rural districts, both for transportation and heating fuel, should they continue to rise in the coming years?

**Hon. S. Bond:** We don't target those kinds of things in the funding that we send to school districts. So we haven't got a particular line that would cover, for example, fuel. What we are trying to do is send as many resources and record levels of funding to districts as we are at now. We are currently at the highest level of funding ever.

[1715]

Having said that, at the moment we are underway with a review of transportation funding — to the funding formula. That's done every year, and the report is then presented back to the minister. At that point in time they consider all kinds of unique geographic factors. In particular, the focus this year is on the funding for transportation and the things that accompany that. So I would expect to see that in the short term. Having said that, funding is assigned by the block, and it is at the highest level ever in the province.

**C. Evans:** I appreciate this year's focus on transportation, and the school districts have discussed it with me. It is, however, the expectation of rural communities that as fuel costs continue to outpace, say, wages or recreation costs or other costs of running schools, especially urban schools, they may be not able to keep up. So I wonder if the minister would consider simply agreeing to fund fuel costs or fuel costs with a rate of inflation based on the price per gallon of diesel fuel, in future, in order to provide some relief.

The risk, of course, is that if we do not guarantee school boards that we will provide their transportation costs, they will.... Some are considering putting a harder boundary on where they are willing to transport students. Of course, as we close rural schools, it becomes an exacerbated problem. If you close a school 20 miles away in order to have a savings, then you increase the number of students that you have to transport.

What is required here is kind of a policy statement. It's for the minister to say to those school districts with declining enrolment: "You know what? If you have to close a school, we guarantee your transportation costs in order to provide efficiencies."

**Hon. S. Bond:** What I'd like to suggest is that we take that specific suggestion — about funding fuel directly — to the Technical Review Committee and ask them to have a look at what that would do to the funding formula. Certainly, I'm from a northern riding as well, and I understand the challenges that we face with that.

I think that would be an acceptable suggestion at this point because, obviously, today I can't stand and say we're going to fund fuel. What I'd like to do is have a look at that through the Technical Review Committee in this process in the next months as we move forward with that review, and put that on our agenda as a specific issue so that if there were to be a suggestion that we change the funding, we could do that in time for next year's school budget. That's what I can offer the member opposite in relation to that issue.

**C. Evans:** This isn't a question but a suggestion. In smaller districts part of the problem that school boards face is that they are not able — because of economies of scale — to purchase large enough volumes of fuel to get the lowest possible price so that fuel might be cheaper in Richmond, where you can buy a large volume, than it is closer to the distribution points, say in the north or on the border with Alberta.

So my suggestion to the minister would be that B.C. Transit and municipalities be encouraged to have a conversation with the ministry, because if we were able to pool all of the industrial fuel in a region — say Nakusp, Nelson, Creston, Castlegar or similar communities in her area — then we might be able to achieve economies of scale and reduce the fuel costs to each of the various users.

Now I want to move to following up last fall's discussion, and my guess is that we'll probably do this every year because of the interest of my constituents in trying to achieve a continual improvement of the situation at Bountiful in Creston.

My first question — and I'm sure the minister has received as many letters as I have on this subject — has to do with the interpretation of the law. There are two independent schools at Bountiful. Well, I think there are. Maybe I'll just start with laying out some background. Is it true that there are still two independent schools running at Bountiful in Creston?

**Hon. S. Bond:** Yes, it is.

[1720]

**C. Evans:** Each of those schools has a board of directors. My question is: if a member of the board of directors or staff in a private school — during the term of a student in their school, for whom they have responsibility — takes on a sexual relationship in or out of marriage with that student, does that constitute a crime under British Columbia legislation?

**Hon. S. Bond:** I would encourage the member opposite to canvass that with the Attorney General. It's certainly not my area of expertise. While I have responsibility for the educational side of that, I'm just not able to answer that question.

**C. Evans:** I wonder if the minister or the ministry has policy on sexual relations between staff or boards of directors of schools and private schools in British Columbia.

**Hon. S. Bond:** Again, I am a bit concerned about the sort of legal aspect of these questions and would much prefer the member opposite to ask them of the Attorney General. Having said that, obviously the broad principle — and one that goes without saying but probably goes better with — is that we expect people to abide within the law.

As the member opposite would know, there are legal issues taking place around this very discussion as we speak. So I would urge him to canvass the Attorney General. We also will review any specific statutes or policies that might be in place, and we can report back. But obviously, schools must abide within the law.

**C. Evans:** I take the advice, and I will canvass it with the Attorney General. But I have a return request. I'm obviously going to stand here every time we do estimates and try to gradually make not radical but substantial change in the normalization of the situation at Bountiful.

I have lots of constituents and people who write to me from all over B.C. and even from other provinces, who believe — perhaps erroneously — that directors of the independent schools at Bountiful have entered into sexual relationships with students at Bountiful while they were students, and who believe that's an inappropriate use of the power of relationship — running a school, having a student and becoming involved in some way.

Since those relationships are sanctified, if you will, by some kind of definition of marriage, it is argued that they are somehow outside the purview of the law. My request to the minister would be: before I stand here again next year, could they do some historical research and find out whether, now or in the recent past, directors of either of the independent schools have entered into an inappropriate relationship with students at either of the two schools in order that — whether or not they have broken a statute of the law — we can

have a conversation here about whether that fits within our ideas of the morality of running schools in British Columbia?

[1725]

**Hon. S. Bond:** First of all, we appreciate the member's passionate views about this subject. What I can say to the member is this. The RCMP are currently investigating allegations of criminal wrongdoing, and we will continue to cooperate with that. You know, my jurisdiction is limited to that within the School Act, so the best place for the discussions about criminal wrongdoing is with the Attorney General. But certainly there is an ongoing investigation with the RCMP.

I can tell the member opposite that we continue — I think our discussion took us, in the last set of estimates, to visits and inspections — to do unannounced inspections, from the School Act side of things. The most recent one was completed on February 24, 2006, so as recently as just over a month ago. In terms of their compliance with legislation and the School Act, that continues to happen.

There is a criminal proceeding underway with the RCMP, and on our side — I know this discussion took place previously with the member opposite — we will continue to do unannounced inspections.

**C. Evans:** I appreciate that we're kind of mixing up issues here. On the subject of hypothetical relationships that may have occurred between people who may have been directors of a school and students, I was trying to make the case that there might be a difference between legality under the statutes and morality about how we want to run our school systems, and was encouraging the minister to have her staff do some research.

Partially, I would like to use these sessions as an opportunity to kill gossip and incorrect information, and the only way to do that is to ask questions and have correct information put on the table. If the information that is coming to me anecdotally is in fact true, the only way to learn that is for the ministry staff to do some research and to come back. At any rate, I'll put those questions off until next year when we meet again. Perhaps I'll have more specifics, or perhaps the minister will.

Moving on to the inspection of public schools, I want to say that I very much appreciate the unannounced nature of the visits. That's where we need to go. My question is: are the two private schools at Bountiful required to teach the British Columbia curriculum in terms of life skills? Specifically, in terms of life skills, I'm interested in those discussions which would happen in a public school on the subject of birth control, sexuality, sexism, male-female relationships, career choice and race relations.

**Hon. S. Bond:** Certainly the expectation is that independent schools that receive funding would teach the B.C. curriculum, the outcomes, and use B.C.-certified teachers to do that. To give the complete context of that, I'm just going to read this to the member

opposite so that there is the connection with the Independent School Act. There is the expectation to use the B.C. curriculum, as the member opposite suggests, and B.C.-certified teachers must be used.

[1730]

The final point, though, is that unlike public schools, government-funded independent schools may provide educational programs from a cultural or religious perspective as long as they are consistent with the Independent School Act. But the requirement is that they use B.C. curriculum. There is, however, the ability for an autonomous addition in terms of cultural or religious perspectives.

**C. Evans:** I get it that the schools have to teach the B.C. curriculum. But does that mean that the life skills course — I'm not sure I'm using the name correctly, but the life skills that are taught in the public schools — is a required curriculum in the private schools?

**Hon. S. Bond:** Yes. They must teach the major components — all of the main points of personal health, and personal health and planning curriculum. So yes, that would be the expectation.

**C. Evans:** My guess is that the minister has also received letters suggesting that one of the teachings at, at least, one of the schools historically has been that black people are an inferior race and are unable to get into heaven by virtue of their birth colour. Has the minister done research to ascertain whether that story is gossip or fact?

**Hon. S. Bond:** I can only tell the member opposite that I have not received a letter that has suggested that to me directly. We also know that independent school inspections would obviously help with ascertaining that the curriculum is being adhered to and certainly to confirm the certification of the teachers. So to the member opposite's direct question, I personally have not seen correspondence of that nature.

**C. Evans:** I'm kind of surprised. I had assumed that the kind of mail I got was universal. Maybe I'm receiving more mail than the norm.

This is not a question, but I would like to put it on the record in preparation for next year. I have received at least one pretty reliable correspondence suggesting that tapes offered at one of the private schools have suggested a race superiority in the Caucasian race and inferiority of other races, and I would simply like to... I guess I will make it as a question. Will the minister ask her private school inspectors to ask, in their next visit, whether or not this is the case?

**Hon. S. Bond:** If the member opposite has information that would help us do that, I would really appreciate it if you could please give that to us. If the member could please do that, we would be happy to be able to look at that. Obviously, we need to have some evidence or some indication of that. So if the member opposite

has anything that would be helpful to us, he could pass that on.

Certainly, that's true of any of the allegations and comments that the member opposite is hearing. If there's some information he could provide to us that would help us look into that, absolutely.... Certainly, that's unacceptable. If that were to occur, that would be unacceptable, so anything the member opposite could forward to us that would help us would be most appreciated.

**C. Evans:** I'm thrilled to get it on the record that that kind of behaviour would be unacceptable. I'm pretty sure that since the minister just said on the record that she would like to get that information, probably half the people in western Canada will begin to write to her. I guarantee to forward whatever letters I get on the subject.

[1735]

My last question on this subject, this year, is a little bit complicated. People have contacted me — again, in an anecdotal way — to suggest that young people who may be students at one of the two schools are also employed by a director of the school in a private business or by the agency that owns the school itself. To the minister: I wonder if she has pondered the question of whether or not it is appropriate behaviour for a school director to employ the students of the school by taking them out of the school during their years of education.

**Hon. S. Bond:** No, it's not something, in essence, that I — or we — have contemplated. I think what is important here is that the member opposite has raised a number of issues, all of which cause concern if in fact there is evidence to demonstrate that. I'm sure the member opposite recognizes that we can't act on anecdotal information. Anything that is of a serious nature like this, if there is a formal complaint, obviously we would move that forward. Some of the issues that have been referenced should probably be referred to the RCMP.

We have not contemplated the issue the member opposite brings forward, but anytime there are comments this serious in nature, we would hope that there would be.... If there's information beyond anecdotal, absolutely, it would be our responsibility and the member opposite's to move that forward not only to us but also potentially to the RCMP.

**C. Evans:** One of the hon. members in the room said to me: "Why didn't you fix it in the '90s?" The problem that the present Attorney General has, that historical Attorneys General have had, Ministers of Education — anyone responsible — is that in the particular situation of Bountiful, it has been historically impossible to come up with a complainant, a person to whom that experience has happened, who is willing to speak to the RCMP or the Attorney General about that experience. There are reasons surrounding that, which I won't go into at present.

I will, of course, present any factual information I come up with to the RCMP, but part of what we need to do here is ensure that the secrecy is lifted off the Bountiful experience, and we put on the record what the expectations of the province are, under any government, for people to behave in certain moral and legal ways.

My last question is quite positive, I think. Would the minister like to discuss events in the last year at the Yahk school and the possibility of having children from Bountiful actually participate in the public school experience?

**Hon. S. Bond:** Certainly, the member opposite is much more well-versed, knowing this inside and out as well as he does. But absolutely, there have been a number of students — I think about 20 — that have actually helped keep the Yahk school open, by having them move from Bountiful to Yahk. We see that as a very positive thing for the Yahk school.

Our understanding, just in briefly conferring with the staff, is that that's going incredibly well. There seems to be a very positive relationship developing there. We're starting to see a bit more of a transfer of thinking and those students moving back and forth through the system.

The member opposite is correct. That's a very positive step. It was very positive for Yahk. As we understand it, there were about six students there, and it really would have forced a school closure because of the dwindling number. This is actually a good-news story in that, in essence, it saved the school, and very good things are happening there as well. I appreciate the member opposite bringing that to the attention of the members here.

**J. Horgan:** Could the minister advise this committee what the communications budget is for the Minister of Education?

[1740]

**Hon. S. Bond:** It's \$2 million.

**J. Horgan:** And what's the lift from last year?

**Hon. S. Bond:** The actual lift is \$2 million. We did not have an advertising budget previous to this.

**J. Horgan:** Could the minister explain why the advertising budget went from zero to \$2 million?

**Hon. S. Bond:** Actually, it happened across government. The budget has existed. It simply was not a ministry line item. It now is. The advertising budget has actually been transferred to the ministry to better reflect where the money will be spent.

**J. Horgan:** Could the minister advise this committee what the cost of the advertising budget was during the October disruption with the B.C. Teachers Federation?

**Hon. S. Bond:** Well, the budget that existed would have been in the Ministry of Finance, public affairs

bureau. The Ministry of Education did not have a specific line item, so there's simply been, in essence, a distribution — a transfer of those moneys — to ministries.

**J. Horgan:** I thank the minister for her response, but I did spend an hour or two with the Minister of Finance on these issues just a few weeks ago. I'm trying at her behest to get a better handle on what's going on in ministries.

Does the director of communications for the Ministry of Education sit on the ministry executive?

**Hon. S. Bond:** Yes.

**J. Horgan:** And does that representative report to the Deputy Minister of Education?

**Hon. S. Bond:** No.

**The Chair:** Noting the time.

**J. Horgan:** I ask that the committee rise, report progress and ask leave to sit again.

**The Chair:** Noting the time, Committee A will recess and stand adjourned until 6:45.

The committee recessed from 5:43 p.m. to 6:48 p.m.

[B. Lekstrom in the chair.]

On Vote 24 (*continued*).

**J. Horgan:** Just before the dinner break we were talking about communications in the ministry. I'd like to pursue this line of questioning, as I said at the time, because in an earlier set of estimates with the Minister of Finance I didn't get some of the answers I was looking for. She recommended that I do it here, so here I am.

I just asked the question about whether or not the director of communications reports to the deputy minister, and the answer was no. Could the minister tell me who the director of communications reports to?

**Hon. S. Bond:** Public affairs.

**J. Horgan:** The \$2 million lift, the zero-to-\$2 million budget for communications — that's administered by the director of communications?

**Hon. S. Bond:** In collaboration and discussion with the ministry.

**J. Horgan:** If there's collaboration, does that mean that the director of communications administers that budget in collaboration with the executive?

[1850]

**Hon. S. Bond:** Yes, in cooperation with the ministry.

**J. Horgan:** This is clearly a new model, where you have a \$2 million line item in a minister's budget that's administered by the public affairs bureau and the Minister of Finance. Can the minister explain to me how that is?

**Hon. S. Bond:** We just said that the ministry has it as a budget line. We work together with the communications director to decide how that will be utilized, in cooperation with the ministry.

**J. Horgan:** Could the minister advise this committee what expectations they have for that \$2 million? Are there any campaigns planned?

**Hon. S. Bond:** In fact, we will be using those dollars to communicate information to British Columbians. At this point, to use the member opposite's own words, we have no campaigns planned. We're going to use it to publicly communicate information about public education, and that's important. People have suggested to us that they want information, and we're going to utilize those dollars for that purpose.

**J. Horgan:** How did the minister communicate with the public before last year, when there was no line item for communications?

**Hon. S. Bond:** Well, in fact, the member opposite had an opportunity to canvass that very issue with the Minister of Finance. That budget was actually administered out of the Ministry of Finance. We now have the opportunity to have that as a budget line in our ministry, and we will use that to communicate with British Columbians.

**J. Horgan:** Does the director of communications have an office space in the ministry building?

**Hon. S. Bond:** Yes.

**J. Horgan:** So then, the director of communications, for all intents and purposes, works for the ministry, administers a budget in the minister's domain but reports to another deputy minister. How is that working out?

**Hon. S. Bond:** Actually, the communications director works with the ministry, and it's working very well. We have an excellent team.

**J. Horgan:** Perhaps the minister could articulate how many members are on the team and what their functions are?

**Hon. S. Bond:** The actual FTE count is administered under the Minister of Finance — the public affairs bureau — because that is where those staff report. Again, the member opposite should canvass that with the Minister of Finance.

**J. Horgan:** Hon. Chair, you'll recognize the irony in this. I did that very thing just two weeks ago and was

advised by that minister that this would be the appropriate forum for these questions. So I guess this open transparency business gets kind of blocked up in the translation somewhere.

[1855]

I was being candid with the Minister of Finance. I asked reasonable questions. I appeared tedious at the time, no doubt, because we are accustomed to no opposition in British Columbia, or at least we had grown unaccustomed to it. But today I'm here, representing the Queen as her official Education critic. I'm asking a simple question, and I'm getting an answer that I should take back to the last minister, who told me to come here.

I did hear the number eight. Are there eight staff at the public affairs bureau focusing on education issues?

**Hon. S. Bond:** The communications team works with the Ministry of Education. They are FTEs of the public affairs bureau.

**J. Horgan:** How many would they be?

**Hon. S. Bond:** We actually think the team number is 11. We will verify that and confirm that for the member opposite.

**J. Horgan:** I was at an event today with the minister. Perhaps, hon. Chair, you may have been there as well. There was a plethora of active communicators buzzing around the room. I'm wondering: of those that were in attendance today, would they be included in that FTE count of 11? Or do other public affairs staff often assist the minister in her communications activities?

**Hon. S. Bond:** They would have been included.

**J. Horgan:** I know we don't want to be too retrospective here, but the public affairs bureau is a bit of a ping-pong ball. It started with Finance. It then went to the Premier's office and then went back to Finance. I know she's only been in the position for a short period of time, but I'll ask the question anyway and see how we go. Has she noticed any difference between when the public affairs bureau and their staff reported to the Premier and when they're reporting to the Minister of Finance?

**Hon. S. Bond:** In fact, we've had a great relationship with communications. They work very hard to do a job of accurately sharing information. That continues to be the case.

**J. Horgan:** Does the minister have at her fingertips the number of press releases distributed by the public affairs bureau on behalf of the Ministry of Education in '05-06?

**Hon. S. Bond:** No, I don't have the exact number.

**J. Horgan:** Would it be more than 20?

**Hon. S. Bond:** There are absolutely more than 20. They're actually contained in a rather large binder, and we have not bothered to spend important time counting the number of them. But they are certainly here and in a binder.

**J. Horgan:** I certainly wouldn't want anybody wasting time collecting data in the Ministry of Education. That would be counterproductive and not focusing on the needs of the student.

I know I'm being a bit churlish at this point, and I look to my friends for that....

**K. Krueger:** I would agree with that.

[1900]

**J. Horgan:** I did ask a series of questions of the minister responsible for public affairs in the hope that I would get a better sense of what the government's communications plan is within the Ministry of Education. So although the minister has said that no campaign is planned, which is the jargon that's used by communicators, not necessarily by me.... If there are no campaigns planned, what would occasion the minister to spend \$2 million? And what would she communicate when she did so?

**Hon. S. Bond:** As I indicated the first time the question was asked, we have no specific plan to lay out information. We know that as parents ask for particular information about student achievement, about accountability, there are things that we'll want to talk about in the public education system. There is no specific plan.

The important thing is that people in British Columbia have told us they want information. This is about sharing information about public education.

**J. Horgan:** The rationale for the question is that if you didn't have the money last year.... One assumes that the questions were similar. The need to communicate was similar. Why do you have it this year and you didn't have it last year?

I assume that if the public required communications activity on outcomes and so on, they would have been able to get that. I'm wondering how it was paid for in previous years.

**Hon. S. Bond:** In fact, the public affairs bureau managed the budget line previous to this. The budget has now been transferred to the Ministry of Education to better reflect where the money would be spent. It is a policy decision which ensures that advertising dollars are spent on our government priorities. We haven't determined how it will be used yet.

**J. Horgan:** And that policy decision was made in the lead-up to the budget in '06-07?

**Hon. S. Bond:** The policy decision was made to better reflect where money is going to be spent in gov-



ernment. We're always looking at how best to reflect where dollars are utilized. If the Ministry of Education is going to advertise, it's best that it's reflected in its budget line?

**J. Horgan:** I fully agree with the minister when she says it should be reflected in the expenditures of the ministry. My concern is that I know there were moneys expended on advertising last year. I recall a very active campaign in October — full-page ads in newspapers across the province, time on BCTV in the dinner hour. These are expensive undertakings. They would have been, I assume, undertaken by the Ministry of Finance on behalf of the Minister of Education last year.

I'm wondering: how did we arrive at the number of \$2 million? Is that roughly what was spent on education advertising last year?

**Hon. S. Bond:** Last year the budget for communications was in the public affairs bureau. It's believed that this is a reasonable amount of dollars to put to one of government's highest priorities. It's been transferred to our budget, and again, we have not decided how it will be used.

**J. Horgan:** Well, I could suggest that it could be put towards special education right off the top, but we'll leave that for now.

Are there expenditures in the budget that could be identified as legal expenses?

**Hon. S. Bond:** Hon. Chair, \$1.2 million is set aside for legal expenses.

[1905]

**J. Horgan:** Would that \$1.2 million also be available for BCPSEA legal costs?

**Hon. S. Bond:** No.

[A. Horning in the chair.]

**J. Horgan:** Now I'm even more confused than I was before. BCPSEA is the bargaining agent for the government of British Columbia in the education sector. Funding for that entity comes from another ministry. Advertising is the responsibility of Finance, but some money has been transferred into the ministry for advertising. Could the minister advise this committee what the costs of legal fees would have been at BCPSEA, and if not, how I could find out?

**Hon. S. Bond:** I would have no idea what BCPSEA's legal costs are. They are not an arm of government.

**J. Horgan:** I know that Bob de Faye is a public servant working with BCPSEA. We had a discussion about this in the Legislature last fall. As the negotiating agent for the government of British Columbia, I thought that they would be an arm, or a finger or some

form of appendage. Perhaps the minister could tell us just who BCPSEA does report to?

**Hon. S. Bond:** BCPSEA is the bargaining agent for school boards in British Columbia. They have a co-governance model. In fact, the board has school trustees on it, and there are representatives from government on that board. But it is co-governed, and it is the bargaining agent for school boards.

**J. Horgan:** Back to the issue of legal costs. There was a lengthy dispute between BCPSEA and the BCTF with respect to free speech. There were significant legal costs, I'm assuming. Can the minister direct me to the agency that would be able to provide that information?

**Hon. S. Bond:** You'd have to direct that question to BCPSEA.

**J. Horgan:** I'm seeking a rope here from the minister. In a co-governance model, one of the co's would be an entity of the Crown, the province of British Columbia, so I can't go to BCPSEA and ask them. I'm wondering if the minister or her staff would have any idea who would be responsible, in that co-governance model, that I could direct the question to within the executive council.

[1910]

**Hon. S. Bond:** BCPSEA is part of the PSEC model, so that information needs to come from BCPSEA or someone related to PSEC.

**J. Horgan:** I'm looking at my organizational chart in my brain, and I think that's the Ministry of Finance, so I'll carry on. Again, sadly, I've missed the opportunity to ask the appropriate minister the question because of the byzantine structures that we have here.

On the legal case itself, the minister remarked at the time that it was unfortunate that the Supreme Court sided with the right to free speech. I'm wondering if the minister could further expand her views on that question.

**Hon. S. Bond:** I think the issue was a little more specific than the issue of free speech. The issue for us as a government is the fact that we believe there are appropriate times and places for discussion of partisan politics. We happen to believe that parent-teacher interviews are not one of them.

**J. Horgan:** I don't disagree with the minister, but the case, as I recall it, was one of the freedom to tell parents, I being one, at a parent-teacher interview what impact government policies — whether it be NDP, Liberal or Conservative government policies — were having on the classroom. We on this side think that's a reasonable thing for educators to do. As a parent, I want to be as informed as I can be. If government policy is having an impact on student outcomes with

respect to my children, I certainly want my educators to tell me about it.

It's interesting because it was BCPSEA who brought the case, but I just heard the minister say it was government's view. So maybe I'm mixing things up here. Was it government that directed BCPSEA to pursue this court challenge, or was it BCPSEA on its own hook?

**Hon. S. Bond:** The whole process was dealt with under BCPSEA.

Of course, this government has a view on that. We've been very clear about that. We have not stepped back from the view that there are always opportunities for people to hear partisan political views. It would be hard for the member opposite to suggest that an organized campaign that included handing out report cards on a particular government is somewhat of a stretch beyond just a discussion of policy.

**J. Horgan:** Well, I think performance measurement is very important, and report cards are the foundation on which the system is based. I don't know. I think we can be overly sensitive to these things. I do agree that it's quite easy for me on the opposition side to be unconcerned about groups in society that are critical of government. But again, as a democrat and as someone who believes in our Charter of Rights and Freedoms, I think that I would defer to the Supreme Court to protect those things. Fortunately, the Supreme Court found in favour of free speech in this instance.

The \$1.2 million set aside for legal fees. Are there cases pending that the minister could advise this committee about?

**Hon. S. Bond:** There are numerous cases — as there are, I'm sure, in most ministries — that are in various stages across the legal process. That, unfortunately, is part of what happens in government.

**J. Horgan:** Is the \$1.2 million an increase over last year's legal fees?

**Hon. S. Bond:** No.

**J. Horgan:** I did raise an issue around school planning councils, and I was advised that there is a case or a challenge to, I assume, the School Act — that section of the School Act which covers SPCs. Would this money line item be expended in that manner, or would the Attorney General be covering costs?

[1915]

**Hon. S. Bond:** In fact, some of these dollars might actually go to deal with this particular case. There are also funds available through the Attorney General. At this point I can't comment on where that might take place, where those funds may come from, but certainly, this may well be out of this pot of dollars.

I should give, also, to the member opposite.... We're happy to pass to him the suit that has been filed.

It's in Supreme Court in Vancouver. We have that data here. We also have the agenda of the latest Education Advisory Council, which the member opposite asked for.

**J. Horgan:** Again, fantastic staff work by the ministry. I thank them for that.

One last question, then: did the ministry overspend on legal fees last year?

**Hon. S. Bond:** No. In fact, it was underexpended.

**The Chair:** The member for Maple Ridge–Kensington.

**A Voice:** Pitt Meadows.

**The Chair:** Sorry about that. Maple Ridge–Pitt Meadows.

**M. Sather:** Thank you, hon. Chair. It's a well-dispersed riding. It's a big one.

I wanted to ask the minister a few questions about special education and special education funding. As we know, this is one of the big issues that's been discussed, that educators have concerns about, that parents have concerns about. I expect the minister does as well.

When we're talking about class composition, this is a big part of the picture. I've had occasion to discuss this issue with educators and constituents and families and parents in school district 42, which is my school district in Maple Ridge–Pitt Meadows.

The system that funds children with special needs has gone through some changes and is different than it used to be. Those children with the most severe disabilities, referred to as low-incidence, being that there aren't as many of them — children with autism, moderate to severe mentally handicapped, blind-deaf children, students and the like — are funded on a per-student basis.

In school district 42, for example, this funding amounts to \$16,000 for children with autism. However, educators in my school district tell me that this funding is not sufficient to cover the needs for low-incidence children. I know the member for Malahat–Juan de Fuca mentioned funding for special needs as an issue.

I wanted to ask the minister: what suggestions does she have as to where our school district can find the extra funding for these students?

**Hon. S. Bond:** I think it's important to point out that I, like the member opposite.... We want to serve all the students in the school system as best we possibly can. It's important to point out that the spending for special education exceeds half a billion dollars in British Columbia.

In fact, we have just last year increased the supplemental funding levels for level two students, which would be the students that the member opposite is referring to. We actually increased that funding in 2005-2006 to \$16,000.

[1920]

I think what's important to point out is that we provide dollars to school districts to make decisions about their children, their students. It's no different with the dollars that are provided for special education. In fact, in the member's district, in this particular budget year we've seen special needs funding move from \$7,378,500 to \$8,124,000. So in fact, we are seeing an increase in funding to that school district, and we know the school district and the team that makes those decisions will use that to the best ability they have to serve those students.

**M. Sather:** Could the minister table that document?

**Hon. S. Bond:** I'm sorry?

**The Chair:** Do you want to repeat that question?

**M. Sather:** The question was: could the minister table that document?

**Hon. S. Bond:** The reason we're conferring is because this is a summary of data, and I wanted to be sure it was actually public information that's been gathered. As we look at the numbers, we think that's the case. I'll confirm that and make sure we can do that. Should we be able to, we'll be happy to do that. I don't see why that would be an issue. It's really just a compilation, looking at district information, so it's not something that would be unknown to people.

**M. Sather:** Thanks to the minister for that.

I hear what the minister is saying about empowering school districts, and we hear a lot from the government about giving choice to districts. But what's happening, in fact, in my school district, and I assume in others as well, is that the funding for these students then has to come from other students — for example, the mildly mentally handicapped, the learning-disabled and those with behavioral disorders: those referred to as high-incidence students in the schools. They don't have any targeted funding, so it then becomes a....

It is a choice, indeed, for the school district, but often it's not a very palatable one for them. School district 42 actually has a really strong reputation for supporting students with special needs, but they find — I think even because of that — that they get into a crunch with trying to meet their needs. So the district has a formula for funding the high-incidence students, based on a given school's population — the numbers of those identified as high-incidence — and as I say, they then provide the staffing.

One of the teachers told me that ten years ago in her school the ratio was 14 high-incidence students per full-time-equivalent. Now it's 26 of those high-incidence students per FTE. So you can see, hon. Chair, although there are increases in funding, as the minister has mentioned, why the experience of the teachers on the ground in the classroom is that it's a cutback.

There's no other way for them to see it than that they're having to do more with less.

[1925]

To complicate the matter, educators in my district talk about a decline in special education assistance. One particular teacher I was talking to said that her special needs students get 42 minutes per week of SEA time, which only works out to about eight minutes a day. It just isn't adequate for their needs.

About the high-incidence dollars, then: is there a provincewide cap on the numbers of these dollars?

**Hon. S. Bond:** In fact, there is no cap on funding for low-incidence students. When you look at those in particular — in essence, "low-incidence, high-cost" is what the description would be — there's no cap.

**M. Sather:** The question was about the high-incidence students — if there was a cap on them.

**Hon. S. Bond:** The answer is no.

**M. Sather:** Again, the educator I was talking to said that in her school, Thomas Haney Secondary in Maple Ridge, there is a cap at \$32,000 for dependent, handicapped students — a cap based on the district population, but not on the number of students who fall into that particular category.

Just in finishing. Students with severe behavioral problems, which, I've been told, teachers call category H — if that's the same language that the ministry uses — are students who are not necessarily acting out. They might be severely withdrawn, depressed or suicidal. I'm told that teachers can have up to 20 of these students in their classroom. It was explained to me that these students used to fall into category D — or chronic health conditions — where the cap was ten students per teacher. So again, these educators experience that as a cutback, if you will.

My last question, then, to the minister is: what plans would she have to assist my school district?

**Hon. S. Bond:** This category of student actually.... To suggest that there have been caps.... In fact, we see that the number of students has increased from 6,300 in 1999 to 7,400 in '05-06. In addition to more students being in that particular category, funding has gone up, as well, for those students — from \$6,000 per student to \$8,000.

[1930]

I do want to go back and just clarify the issue of caps, because I don't want the member opposite leaving here with misinformation if I may have answered the question in that way. When the member opposite asked about caps, I assumed the question was about the number of children. There is a funding formula, and the number is \$32,000 for the students that are in level one. Level two is \$16,000, and level three is \$8,000. Those students are funded at those rates, but there is no cap on the number of students that can access those dollars because we use per-pupil funding.

If a district has a certain number of students, they would get \$32,000 if the students were in level one. There is no cap on the number of students, but obviously, there's a per-pupil formula, which is \$32,000.

**J. Horgan:** While we're on the subject of special needs, we did have a public issue some weeks ago with respect to school leaving certificates. I was very pleased that the minister reversed field and reinstated the school leaving certificate.

Could the minister explain to me what process was followed to come to a conclusion that these certificates shouldn't be issued by the province?

**Hon. S. Bond:** Actually, there was an extensive consultation, through the graduation review, when changes were made about graduation across the entire public education sector. There was a lot of dialogue, both about this issue and about graduation requirements as a whole.

I think the point to be made, and the one to clarify, is the fact that the certificates were always going to be issued. The point was where they were going to be issued from. After the discussion that took place in 2004, I believe it was — and the change wasn't to take place until later this year — the decision was that the most valid place to do that, in light of the consultation that had taken place, was at the school district. The school district would issue the certificate based on a student meeting a certain set of criteria, which they would publish.

The issue was not ever that there wouldn't be a certificate. The issue was: who would issue the certificate? The issue for parents that arose was the parallel nature of that certificate to the Dogwood.

**J. Horgan:** The minister just touched on my second question as she concluded her remarks. If a Dogwood can be issued by the province, why cannot a leaving certificate? I know that there was extensive consultation, as the minister suggests. I'm sure they discussed portfolios, as well, which is something I'd like to talk about later on. But why not as it is now? Who was clamouring for this change?

[J. Yap in the chair.]

**Hon. S. Bond:** Certainly, there were a number of people who shared the view — and I don't have the reporting-out from that particular consultation; it was in 2004 — and who just believed that the place closest and most appropriate to do that was the school district. I think that of more concern to people was that there actually be some published criteria so that people would understand what had been accomplished when the certificate was issued.

For me, it was not a difficult decision, actually, to return to what is a parallel process to the Dogwood. That is a decision we made quite readily. But it will be coupled with that most important decision from 2004, which is the publishing of criteria. The school districts

will now be expected to publish criteria, but the ministry will issue the certificate.

**J. Horgan:** I thank the minister for her explanation.

I'm concerned about publishing criteria, because as I understand it, leaving certificates are issued when a student achieves the goals set out in the individual education plan. What publication would be required? I mean, it seems to me that all cases are different and that having a set of criteria for all special needs students might not hit the mark. Maybe I'm misunderstanding what she means by that.

[1935]

**Hon. S. Bond:** Certainly, the member opposite is correct. The majority of districts use the individual education plan. That is one of the possible criteria, but there are other districts that use other methods and other parts of a program to do that.

The fundamental basis will still be an IEP. We simply want people to understand that there is validity and credibility and that a student has met a certain set of criteria. That seems to be something that many special education parents have asked for, as well, so we're responding to that at the same time. We won't see a change in the issuance of certificate, but we will ask school districts to make it clear why the certificate is being issued.

**J. Horgan:** I hope I'm not being overly obtuse on this, but the individual education plan is a document prepared by parents, school staff and district staff. When the requirements are met, as they would be for a Dogwood, the district advises the ministry and the certificate is issued. I'm sure that the answer is just eluding me, and it'll come to me this fifth time, but what I heard from parents and what I feel in my bones is that it was the continuity. I know the minister shares this, so I'm not poking here for any reason other than that I want to find out what "publishing guidelines" means.

A plan is put in place by the professionals and the family. The student fulfils that plan. The district advises the ministry. The ministry presents the documents, and what's being published? Is it to ensure that this is a separate and distinct document from the Dogwood? Is that it? Or is it that each time an IEP is achieved, a new recording or reporting mechanism will be created?

**Hon. S. Bond:** I think the major issue here is that we just want this to have recognition and to have people understand what was accomplished by that student. There are things that special needs students accomplish outside their IEP, so we're simply saying that we'd like the district to make clear the fact that the IEP would be the basis of this. But students, for example, have other studies and other courses of personal programming. We would simply want it to be made clear that that would be part of the criteria in getting your school leaving certificate. So in essence, we think that

the issuing of the certificate will be a good-news story and so will the publishing of what that recognizes.

**J. Horgan:** I'm sorry, but I'm still not getting this. Where are we publishing this? Who's publishing it? Why are they publishing it? If my children, one of whom is on an IEP, fulfil requirements, the district acknowledges that, passes on the information, the data, the rationale to the ministry, publishes it and passes it on, and the certificate is issued. Where is this going to be published, who's going to do it, and for what purpose?

**Hon. S. Bond:** Okay. Let's try it one more time. The criteria would be published in a district. It would simply state that a school leaving certificate would be issued if a student has completed their individual education plan — and there may be other things, which could be articulated by a school district, that students have completed or accomplished in their district. Once those criteria have been met, the name would be forwarded to the Ministry of Education to issue the certificate.

[1940]

**J. Horgan:** Well, I think I'm getting close, but I still don't understand this publishing business. When I think of publishing, I think we're creating a document that's for wide distribution. The whole integrity of the IEP process and the leaving certificate process is to make it harmonious with the Dogwood. Students are working together in the class. They have different objectives to achieve. They achieve those objectives. The province of British Columbia acknowledges that.

So maybe if we're in agreement on that, and I think we are, let's just focus on the publishing. Why are we doing that? It's not done, as I understand, for Dogwood students. It's not published. The records are kept and are verified, if required, but by and large, the district says this person meets the requirements and the certificate is issued.

**Hon. S. Bond:** Published simply means that we're going to state that when you need to get a Dogwood, you do these things. This is what you have done as a student. We're simply going to say that a school completion certificate — we're asking districts to say — will be awarded if you have completed your IEP and any other requirements that the district might have. It's exactly the same as typical students would use.

**J. Horgan:** Would the minister provide us with examples of these publications? As I read portions of the policy, as it currently exists, it states as follows, "It is an important statement of personal achievement, reflecting the accomplishment of goals a student has chosen to pursue during intermediate and graduation years," among other things.

So there is an elaborate and significant policy currently in place — which is published, because I'm reading it. What are we doing in addition to that? If there is

a provincial policy with respect to leaving certificates, let's state what it is, and let's move on. If it's going to be a provincial policy with district addendums, then we should be clear on that as well.

**Hon. S. Bond:** This is a new process. We are asking school districts to work with us, to talk about what the expectations are for students that are going to receive school completion certificates. There has been a great deal of discussion about this topic with many special needs parents and other groups, in terms of what this means. It's an important component. We're continuing to work out those details.

**J. Horgan:** I guess it's the newness and why it's required that I'd like to canvass here.

I applauded the minister. It's in print; it's in the *Times Colonist*. It says the member for Malahat-Juan de Fuca says the Education Minister has done a good thing here. That's what I believe, but now I'm less clear on this good thing, because we had a policy in place that was working effectively. There wasn't a clamour — the word I used a minute ago — that I was aware of, for a drastic change.

A policy comes forward that appears to be far from well thought out. Questions are raised. Thousands of parents mobilized. The minister is approached by members on both sides of the House: "What's going on?" The right thing appears to be done. The policy is reversed.

When something's reversed, one assumes we're going back to where we initially started from, but that's not what happened, by the sounds of it. It appears to me that steps were made in the wrong direction. Those steps were retraced, but in the interests of appearing to have done something useful, we've got a new policy which involves the publication of information that wasn't previously required. Is that the case?

**Hon. S. Bond:** We've said clearly — and I've said it four times now — that, in fact, we are going to issue the certificates from the ministry. It is absolutely parallel to the Dogwood situation, where students and parents are completely aware of what is required in order for a Dogwood to be issued. That's exactly what we're going to do with the school completion certificates.

[1945]

**J. Horgan:** I'll have to look at the *Blues* as they come forward, but I did distinctly hear the minister say "new," "what will also be required" and "in addition." These are comments that suggest that there has been a change. My understanding — and the understanding, I believe, of the parents that approached the minister and other members of this place — was that an error had been made, that the policy would be reversed to its original position and that we would carry on from there.

That's not to say that improvements can't be made — as the minister may well want to do. But the fundamental principle as I understood it when I was ap-

plauding the efforts of her and her staff was: "We made a mistake. We're going back to where we were. If there are going to be improvements, those will be done in a public way. Parents will be consulted."

I don't get that sense. Today I don't have that comfort. I'm hopeful the minister could stand and say that, with consultation, there may well be additional requirements but that there are no new requirements under the existing policy.

**Hon. S. Bond:** This is good news. It is an appropriate thing that the decision was made to continue to issue certificates from the ministry level. We are simply asking school districts to make public their expectations before a school leaving certificate is issued. In fact, during the consultation period in 2004 and in ongoing discussions with special needs parents, that discussion has taken place.

As I've suggested, there has been no finalization of what that looks like. We are still in the process of discussing that. The bottom line is this: the member opposite and special needs parents can rest assured that this process will continue to recognize and honour the work that is done by their students, and certificates will be issued by the ministry.

**J. Horgan:** "To receive the British Columbia school completion certificate, the principal, in consultation with teachers and parents, should ensure that the student has achieved the goals and objectives outlined in the student learning plan." That seems pretty clear. That's published. That seems to be sufficient to meet the needs that were previously in place prior to 2004.

Now, the minister talks about a consultation process that's been underway since the reversal of field on this policy. I'm curious as to when that would happen. Would that have been between the EAC and the round-table meetings?

Again, a little bit of fatigue going on. We've got a steady stream of people coming to consult. I don't know when that would have happened. It was a month ago, I think. The hon. member from Kensington.... It was only a month ago that this discussion took place. I heard the minister give assurances that consultation will continue and that school leaving certificates will be issued as they have in the past. If she wants access to the many electronic messages that I've been receiving on this question, I'm happy to give them to her, and maybe the consultation could begin anew.

But let's change fields a bit here and move on to a question with respect to the budget lift of \$112 million. Was the \$2 million lift in communications part of that \$112 million lift?

**Hon. S. Bond:** Yes.

**J. Horgan:** More good news. So that means, then, that the much-ballyhooed \$112 million lift was in fact \$110 million for the classroom. Could the minister break down what other purposes that \$110 million will be put towards?

**Hon. S. Bond:** We can get to this one very quickly. We've said very clearly that \$20 million was added to the block funding.

**J. Horgan:** Is there any what I would call Vince Ready money in the \$112 million lift?

**Hon. S. Bond:** No, in fact, that money.... We have already dealt with the \$20 million that was an agreement between the Teachers Federation and us. All of those dollars are accounted for, and it does not come out of that money.

[1950]

**J. Horgan:** Was that money to harmonize the grid, or was that for the extended disability fund?

**Hon. S. Bond:** The \$40 million was the disability component.

**J. Horgan:** And that's not within the \$112 million — the \$110 million?

**Hon. S. Bond:** No, it isn't.

**J. Horgan:** So we have \$20 million to go directly into class size and class composition, as was committed to in the Ready agreement, and another \$40 million for the LTD. Of the remaining \$90 million, could the minister break down what the expenditures will be on.

**Hon. S. Bond:** Well, in fact, the member probably needs to clarify for us. But the \$112 million lift is over three years. So the first year's portion is \$20 million. Then, I think the next year is \$20 million. It's a three-year period, the \$112 million.

**J. Horgan:** So then \$60 million of that is block funding — if it's \$20 million per annum over three years?

**Hon. S. Bond:** In fact, we have \$27 million in '06-07, \$20 million of that directly to the block; \$28 million in '07-08; and \$57 million in '08-09.

**J. Horgan:** And the \$2 million annually for communications. So \$6 million of that \$112 million is towards communications — \$2 million annually for three years?

**Hon. S. Bond:** You're correct. That is the number.

**J. Horgan:** So our \$112 million is really \$106 million. Of that \$106 million, how much would be for the lift for per-student funding for private schools?

[1955]

**Hon. S. Bond:** We need to go back and just work on the math here in terms of the questions from the members opposite.

We got a lift of \$27 million in the February budget, but in the September update, we got \$93 million. So the total amount of money that we're talking about over

three years, additional dollars to public education, to our ministry budget, is \$437 million. So we can't be doing math on \$20 million, because, in fact, we have a lift of \$119 million in this '06-07, \$143 million and then \$172 million. So it's \$119 million, \$143 million, \$172 million for a total of \$437 million over the next three years.

**J. Horgan:** Let's focus on the '06-07. Those are the estimates we're dealing with, and I know that'll make the staff happy. The \$119 million this year: \$2 million, communications; \$20 million, block funding lift... Well, I'll stop on that, then. We're clear on the \$2 million, education, so we're down to \$117 million.

**Hon. S. Bond:** One of the challenges we face is the fact that we're dealing with budget years and fiscal years. Of course, the Ministry of Education budget spans both of those, because the funding for schools goes to June. So we're trying to sort through those numbers for you.

Of the \$119 million, \$60 million went to the block over the fiscal year. So that's the reason it's hard to calculate. The staff is trying to do that. So, in essence, part of that would be in '05-06 and part of that would be in '06-07 because of the two different budgeting periods.

**J. Horgan:** We always bog down when we get to the abacus. I hope the staff and the minister will indulge me, because it's complicated going back and forth in this process. We could do it at a table in half an hour, no doubt, with a calculator.

We've been discussing \$112 million as the published number in the budget that I recall seeing, and in the throne speech. We're now at \$119 million. Now, that is perhaps as a result of the crossover years that we've talked about, fiscal versus school — the calendar. But again, I have to ask what happened to the Ready money — if that was included in the \$150 million lift from last year. Did that become \$170 million?

**Hon. S. Bond:** There's still confusion with the numbers you just gave me. The \$112 million is the number that comes from the February budget update. So that's \$27 million, \$28 million and \$57 million across three years. So if we're going this way, that's \$112 million. To that, we have to add the September update where we got a significant lift. So again, let's go across those numbers. It's \$93 million in '06-07. The way you get the \$119 million number is by taking \$93 million from September, \$27 million for February and add that up. That gives you \$119 million.

[2000]

Let's do the next year, then, so we can just get the columns going the other way: \$116 million in September, \$28 million in February, for a total of \$143 million second year out. Final year out: \$116 million, \$57 million, for a total of \$172 million. So the September budget update would be \$325 million across that line. Add the February budget line, which is \$112 million, so a grand total over the next three years of \$437 million.

**J. Horgan:** I know I used to scratch my head with the minister's staff on these things not that long ago. It seems like an eternity now, and the math doesn't come to me any easier than it did then, I suppose, but I did have the benefit of one of those little machines in my hand.

[H. Bloy in the chair.]

Again, I have to go back. Let's start with the 112, which is 27, 28 and 57. I've got that. So let's go with the \$27 million in this fiscal — \$20 million to the block, \$2 million to communications and \$5 million to private schools. Is that about right? I think it is. When I take those three numbers, I can get to 27, so that's why I'm probably delighted to do that. But apparently, I'm not able to do that.

I think it's \$4.7 million for private schools, and \$27 million would give us.... So \$20 million for the block, as the minister said, would give us the 27.

**Hon. S. Bond:** Okay. Let's look at 2006-2007. If the member opposite would indulge me, let's take the \$119 million number. Okay? So that would be the total of taking the February and the September uplifts that we got — a total of 119. We've got 93 plus 27, so let's start down.

Out of that \$119 million, \$98 million goes to public schools. That includes all of the core and all of the grants that are associated with the public schools. Independent schools would get \$4.6 million, which is the number that you've actually been giving me, and that's correct. Then there are a number of other line items that I'm including — debt service, early learning, management and executive support, etc., which brings us to 119. The vast majority is \$98 million, and it goes to public schools with 4.6 going to independent. So hopefully that format is better for both of us to work from.

**J. Horgan:** I think that does it. We've got the \$2 million for communication. We hadn't factored in debt servicing and operating costs for ministry, and that would probably round it up quite nicely.

With that, then, we have wage increases that are going to be paid for out of the Finance Minister's allocation for increases. Can the minister tell me when...? Of course, we know we'll get a report, hon. Chair, from the IIC — hopefully, by the end of the week. A table will be in place so that we can get towards June and perhaps realize the collective agreement that we're all hoping for. But with wages not factored into this, what does the minister anticipate the overall budget will be for '06-07 beyond the \$119 million, once that's done? What's factored for education?

[2005]

**Hon. S. Bond:** Obviously, I can't speculate on what that amount would be, but I think the very positive news is that government has set aside a significant fund of \$6 billion, and those increases would come out of that fund and then be added to this particular budget line.

That's great news, and especially good news for school districts. As we add those dollars for wages, those will be covered out of that pot of dollars. It's too far beyond me to speculate on what that might be. Like the member opposite, I am hoping and wishing for a negotiated settlement that is fair and reasonable.

**J. Horgan:** Then from the Finance Minister's pot of gold, we have BCTF; we have principals, vice-principals; we have CUPE; we have the whole range of human resource requirements for the ministry. With that lift, the increase, we'll be doing that math another day.

But let's go back to the \$119 million. Were there, as was contemplated in the Ready recommendations, any additional resources set aside for potential class size, class composition remedies, after bargaining or during bargaining?

**Hon. S. Bond:** The budget, as you see before you.... Those are the numbers that it would be anticipated that school districts would need to utilize.

**J. Horgan:** I think I'm just going to pass this for the time and move on to other areas where we might be able to have a dialogue at this late hour, rather than doing the math. I'll go away and do some, and maybe we'll come back and do it again.

With respect to bargaining, then. I'm in receipt of correspondence from the Saanich school board — and I believe it was sent to the minister, as well — expressing concern that non-union staff may not be included in the Minister of Finance's salary envelope. I believe it is, but could the minister confirm that that's the case?

**Hon. S. Bond:** That's a question that the member opposite would have to clarify with the Finance Minister.

**J. Horgan:** The minister has the correspondence, as well, so we'll both try to figure out an answer for that school board.

On the grid harmonization and competitiveness with other jurisdictions. This speaks to looming teacher shortages, and certainly a TOC shortage that we're experiencing right now in this calendar year or this school year. Does the minister have plans, once we get a table, to contemplate how we can make salaries more competitive with other jurisdictions in Canada?

**Hon. S. Bond:** In fact, I will not be at the bargaining table, and certainly, I can assure you that the goal of bargaining, as it is with all the other public sector unions, will be to come to a fair and reasonable settlement. I continue to be optimistic that that will be the case with the Teachers Federation as well.

**J. Horgan:** I appreciate it. I don't want to get the minister in a position to speak about negotiations. She's not going to be at the table, and that's fine.

I guess it's a policy question, then. I do know that in listening to the Minister of Finance when she tabled the supplementary estimates for the \$1 billion in bonuses, her comments at the time made reference to the workforce being competitive with other jurisdictions.

As a question of policy, or a matter for polite conversation, could the minister advise us of her thoughts on how we can retain and attract new teachers when we appear to be increasingly uncompetitive in terms of salary?

**Hon. S. Bond:** Well, we know we want the teachers in British Columbia to have a fair and reasonable settlement, and we remain hopeful that that will certainly occur in the province.

In terms of seats in post-secondary institutions, we find that teaching programs continue to be extremely well-subscribed. We graduate 1,700 teachers, and there are about 3,800 seats. I'd have to double-check the graduate number, but it's 1,700 or 1,900. The number of seats available is about 3,800, so we continue to see the programs well-subscribed.

[2010]

We are certainly seeing teachers on call moving off the teachers-on-call list, and you can expect that when, over the last year, we've actually hired 1,200 more teachers into the system. So there is some transition there. Our concern continues to be that there are shortages of specialist teachers, in particular. They tend to be in rural or hard-to-place communities, so we do need to continue to strategize about that.

**J. Horgan:** The 1,200 number — that's a new number to me. I have a number of about 549 that were hired as a result of the Ready recommendations. Maybe, after I've finished my little ramble here, the minister could comment on that 700.

Tom Hierck, the president of the Principals Association, spoke publicly about a looming shortage of administrators in the 3,000-to-4,000 range in the next three to four years. As the minister will know, by and large, the ranks of our administration are usually filled by teachers upgrading their skills and taking on larger leadership roles in the schools. So we have the double challenge of an aging population of educators who are going to be looking to retirement, we have administrators who are going to be looking to retirement, and the 1,700 to 1,900 graduates may well decide that the pastures are greener in other jurisdictions.

I know, from discussions with recruiters coming to British Columbia to steal away our best and brightest to meet shortages in other jurisdictions, that that is a challenge in and of itself. Perhaps the minister could help me out on the 700 teachers that I'm not aware of who were hired and any plans or strategies that the minister and her crew are going to put in place to try and get more graduates.

**Hon. S. Bond:** The 700 number that I referred to came as a result of the addition of the \$150 million in the previous budget year. We actually asked school



districts to report back to us what they had done with those dollars, with a particular focus on class size, composition, special education.

In the number of staff people that were added to the system, approximately 700 were teachers, but there was also additional support staff hired — a significant number of personnel altogether that came out of the \$150 million addition.

It's important to point out that that was a particularly important decision, because that is core funding, so that \$150 million continues on with the budget even at a time of declining enrolment. That's where the 700 teachers came from. With the \$20 million from the Vince Ready decision, that was another 570-plus, I believe. Those are not exact numbers, but roughly 500-and-something there and then 700.

In terms of dealing with the situation around challenges with personnel, the fact of the matter is that we continue to produce a significant number of graduates. We also have about 500 out-of-province teachers that actually come and are certified in British Columbia every year. They actually come to B.C., and they are certified here. They, obviously, have to be certified as B.C. teachers. We think the number there is about 500 as well.

In terms of administrative leadership, we had set aside a leadership fund of \$5 million a year or so ago, I believe. The program started at the University of Victoria last summer to provide training and opportunities for our teachers to move into the administrative ranks. So in fact, we are looking at succession planning and how we provide support and resources to do that.

We know that there are specialist teacher shortages, and we need to continue to work there. But we're confident that we will continue to meet the needs of the school system with the personnel that we're training and bringing to British Columbia.

[2015]

**J. Horgan:** I do take some comfort in the minister's assurances that succession planning is well underway. But certainly, as a member of the public, the numbers are startling. Coupled with other skill shortages that we're realizing as we have our aging population move into other facets of their lives, leaving it to us young folk to carry the freight, it's a challenge, whether it be apprenticeship training or post-secondary instruction. We have a shortage at that level as well. So I take some comfort in that.

But a \$5 million fund for leadership training — what exactly would be involved in that?

**Hon. S. Bond:** Actually, we're doing a number of things simultaneously with that fund. In fact, we are looking at significant program development as we look at the kinds of things that are necessary to ensure that our teachers that want to move forward have the training that's necessary. We're working with post-secondary institutions to identify what those program needs might be. We're also, then, going to be looking at identifying the kinds of standards that would be ex-

pected for a principal as we move those teachers forward.

So it's fairly new and fairly early in its stages, but we know that it's a critical issue as we look to make sure that we have the administrative support and the teaching staff that we will need over the next number of years.

**J. Horgan:** I had a friend — my best friend, in fact — who was a teacher and became an administrator. It took him, I think, four summers — four trips back from various points. Fort Nelson was one posting he had; then, later, into Quesnel. It took him four summers, plus a lot of work over Christmas and various other holidays, to get the credential improvements that he needed to be an administrator in his district. That's four years of summer school, once a teacher decides that's a direction he or she wants to take their career.

So in the succession planning, as much as it's... I'm gratified to hear that UVic is one of the schools. You mentioned other post-secondary institutions. I'm hopeful that the minister will be able to tell us about UNBC and UBC having similar programs. Is that the case?

**Hon. S. Bond:** I'm always delighted when the member opposite gives me the opportunity to talk about UNBC and UBC. In fact, we are going to triple the number of spaces available for that particular leadership development this summer. We would hope in the future... It is not being expanded at this point in time to other institutions, but certainly, that is in our planning, to try to move the programs out to both UNBC and UBC. So it's a very good comment, and certainly one that we also would support. We are already, this summer, looking at tripling those numbers.

**J. Horgan:** But that \$5 million — is it dedicated to UVic or to the program?

[2020]

**Hon. S. Bond:** Of the \$5 million, the money was actually... A society was created called the B.C. Education Leadership Council. The dollars rest with that council. Part of the work they're doing is looking at programs across the province and across universities.

Out of that \$5 million, it was a \$400,000 grant to UVic to see that first program take place. It's actually being run by a society, and they're in the process of planning and looking at future opportunities. But the majority of the \$5 million is still there for future expansion.

**J. Horgan:** Well, it was at UVic that my best friend took his summers. I know the program, obviously, did a great job with him and a couple of other friends of mine, as they wanted to move into administration. Certainly, UVic's got the track record. If we could emulate that in another institutions across the province, that would be a good thing to deal with this challenge.

Back to teachers, then, and retention. Certainly one would argue that with a shortage, if I understand la-

bour markets, it puts them in a pretty good position to negotiate in the weeks ahead, if they get a table to negotiate at. We've already talked — or I have, at least — about recruitment from other jurisdictions — Alberta and other locations where compensation packages are more appealing. I know that's going to be a challenge for government.

But at the same time — back to labour markets — we do require TOCs to ensure that we have teachers available when illness strikes. We know most teachers are immune to the various diseases that we understand, but every now and again, they succumb to an odd virus. We have 3,800 seats. We have teachers coming from other jurisdictions and receiving credentials. What does the minister have in mind to address the TOC challenges that we face this calendar year?

**Hon. S. Bond:** Well, what we're seeing now is that TOC lists are actually being opened up again around the province. Many of them were closed, because.... There are districts that are currently interviewing people to put them on their TOC list. One of the challenges that's faced is that when you add an additional 500 teachers, many of those are coming off teacher-on-call lists and moving into school classrooms — great news for teachers on call and a great new group of teachers now in those classrooms. We are obviously watching school districts open up those TOC lists. They're interviewing, and certainly, they will be replenishing the TOC lists.

**J. Horgan:** I thank the minister for her answer. The data that I have here in front of me says that we've lost 5,600 teachers since 2001. We've hired another 700 plus another 570 in the past 12 months. We have an aging population. We have an aging profession. If I were a TOC, if I were just out of university, I'd be pretty happy.

But I have heard of a phenomenon, and I'd like the minister to comment on it. We have some of our educators retiring because they can't take the hurly-burly of large classes and increasing composition challenges that didn't exist when they started teaching 30-odd years ago. But they don't want to let their tools rust, and they're finding that being on a TOC list is not a bad place to be. They can get in the classroom a few days a month, continue to interact and shape the minds of the future.

I want to know if the minister has any issues with that. Are there policy constraints that would prohibit retiring teachers from becoming TOCs?

[2025]

**Hon. S. Bond:** Certainly, school boards would have the discretion to be able to decide whether or not that would be appropriate. They would simply go through the interview process, and if they'd had a successful teaching career, that's probably something that school districts would welcome. But that would be a school district decision.

As we've already mentioned, there have been a significant number of TOCs moving off that list, so

districts will now be working to replenish. Certainly, that might be an avenue that boards could consider.

**J. Horgan:** Certainly, after seeing our friend from West Vancouver return today and talk of early retirement or mandatory retirement, I think it's a policy that we would want to explore. If I understand the minister correctly, there is no provincial restriction, beyond perhaps some pension issues that may emerge from double-dipping, as when one collects their pension as well as a salary from TOC-ing.

**Hon. S. Bond:** I think the member opposite has captured that very well. We certainly have no specific issues. There may be some things that need to be worked out, but obviously school districts would have that at their discretion. This may be a time when people may choose to come back and do that for another part of their lives. I think it was a good point made by the member opposite.

**J. Horgan:** I'm just getting warmed up with the good points. I'm glad that....

Interjection.

**J. Horgan:** I'm glad that the mood in the room has improved. Maybe it was dinner that did that. I'm happy it has, nonetheless.

Let's talk about the new teachers then — 700 and 570. I want to know if the minister can help me with the distinction between additional teachers and new teachers. What I mean by that is: if there are additional teachers, that would be in addition to the ones that were there before. If they're new teachers, they've never been teachers before, or they're new positions rather than just add-ons to those that we already had. Is that making any sense?

Interjection.

**J. Horgan:** That was a mailed-in question. Perhaps I'll try again. I'll let that one fly by, and my colleague can ask it his own self. There you go.

Interjection.

**J. Horgan:** I'll leave that.

**Hon. S. Bond:** All right. All of these teachers would be additional positions to the ones that were in the system, but they could certainly be old teachers or new teachers.

**J. Horgan:** So then there are 1,200 additional teachers, which is what the minister said, I believe, when we started on this — additional teachers.

**Hon. S. Bond:** I just had to check, because I was not confused until the question was asked. So, actually, that is correct.

**J. Horgan:** With respect to teacher shortages — TOCs — I think we've canvassed that fairly well.

We understand what we're going to do with administrators: we're going to replace them with new entrants, so perhaps old teachers who want to take on new leadership challenges in the latter years of their career....

But the minister did make reference to specialist teachers being a challenge. Is there any strategy in place to address that concern? My understanding is mostly sciences with a couple of history degrees. Of course, I'm garden variety, but there are people out there that have these skills. How are we attracting them?

[2030]

**Hon. S. Bond:** When we look at the issue of shortages, they're not new, actually, to British Columbia. I can remember that when I was a school board chair, there was a challenge even then filling some of those specialist teacher positions. In particular, we have issues around science and senior math. Of course, geography is an issue, as well, and special education.

One of the things we're doing is very much encouraging young people who are considering going for a teaching degree to consider some of those specialist areas. There's a lot of discussion around that when universities recruit their students. So that's one thing.

I do think we need to be cautious about sort of talking about a shortage. I think we have to be very careful about that. There are certainly some short-term challenges with TOCs. We're now seeing districts open up those lists because of the number that we've actually hired in the last months and year. So there are some challenges. We're going to look very carefully at where and what those particular challenges might be.

The other thing we're going to do, and we want to make it very clear that there's always a significant, important role for face-to-face instruction.... But where this is very difficult, we're also going to make sure that students across the province have some additional opportunities. We are finding that with the use of technology, we're able to provide some particular courses and opportunities that simply were not able to be provided for students in the past.

So we're going to use a combination of things, including encouraging students, looking at those areas where there are shortages and looking at new technology.

**J. Horgan:** This might be a good opportunity to spend the last few moments we have this evening on that question of new technology, and then we can scratch it off my list of things to talk about.

I happen to agree with the minister that we have to take full advantage of the technology that we're developing. As I've said many times today and the minister acknowledges, the world today is not the world that we grew up in. However — and I know she chose her words very carefully — technology is not a replacement for in-class teaching, but it can be a useful addendum. It can be, certainly, in areas where specialists

don't exist — rural areas, obviously. My friend from North Island is not here, but a big challenge — and I believe she raised this privately with the minister — is something as simple as a history instructor at the North Island high school. I know I'd be happy to go up in my spare time and help out, but it's a challenge.

Perhaps the minister could expand on what the virtual classroom would look like. What steps will be taken to ensure that we don't reduce face-to-face, personal human contact for these students?

**Hon. S. Bond:** I think, in fact, we're going to look at a variety of combinations. Let me give the member opposite a perfectly good example. In the school district that I come from, we have seen three schools where it was not possible to offer English literature because the classes were too small. We now have the opportunity for students to take an English lit class.

They're connected together from two different locations in Prince George to a school in McBride. There is a teacher that facilitates that process. I sat in on a class where they were studying Shakespeare, and they were doing it in three different locations. They were using virtual technology.

The great news about that is students were getting an excellent opportunity. The teacher facilitated the class, and students had an opportunity they didn't have before. That's the kind of innovation we're talking about with virtual education.

**J. Horgan:** I agree with the minister that distance education — in rural communities, in particular — can be partially addressed by using technologies. We talked a couple of times today about the Khowhemun experiment, which is one that I would have been happy to observe — maybe another time.

[2035]

But again, it's the access to a human being that can bring all of this together for the students. Perhaps the minister can use the example of the two schools in PG and the one in McBride. How many students were involved in that? Was it a number that would have equalled a full class under the School Act? Or was it just a handful that wanted to get this English lit requirement for graduation, and there was one teacher? Where was the teacher located? Were there support systems in the other two schools in the event that they needed further hands-on instruction?

**Hon. S. Bond:** Well, the Prince George example is only one of them. We have it happening in numerous places around the province. But, yes, there's support provided at each of the locations where those students are, and there are enough students to make it worthwhile for that to take place. Obviously, they couldn't do that if there weren't the numbers to make that work.

In the classroom that I was in, there were probably six or eight kids in the actual physical space that I was in, probably another six in the other school and four or five in the other. Again, it's about making a decision that allows that course to take place because those

three schools have come together. Without that, that simply would not have occurred. Yes, there are people resources attached to that. There are also opportunities for the students to do either phone-back or e-mail dialogue with those instructors. Lessons are often shared electronically — those kinds of things.

There isn't a template for this. There is opportunity. There are resources, and there's just a real spirit of being willing to try this kind of approach to make sure that students get expanded opportunities.

**J. Horgan:** Again, I support what the minister is saying, particularly because she appears to be mindful of the need for that human contact. It's not just academic achievement that we're trying to realize in our

system. I know the minister and her staff know that. The emotional and social development are as important, and clicking and dragging with your mouse is not going to achieve that in the long term.

Again, we would certainly be beyond Luddite to abandon this opportunity, ever mindful that it's the instructor, the professionals available for follow-up that are so important to the outcomes we want to achieve.

With that, I ask that the committee rise, report progress and ask leave to sit again.

Motion approved.

The committee rose at 8:38 p.m.

## HANSARD SERVICES

Director  
Jo-Anne Kern

Acting Production Manager  
Robert Sutherland

Editorial Supervisors  
Janet Brazier, Christine Ewart

Senior Editor — Galleys  
Heather Bright

Senior Editor — Editorial Support  
Robyn Swanson

Technical Operations Officers  
Pamela Holmes, Emily Jacques

Research  
Jaime Apolonio, Mike Beninger  
Dan Kerr, Cristy McLennan  
Sarah Wiebe

Editors  
Shannon Ash, Laurel Bernard, Andrew Costa,  
Heather Gleboff, Margaret Gracie, Jane Grainger, Iris Gray,  
Linda Guy, Bill Hrick, Paula Lee, Elizabeth Levinson,  
Marg MacQuarrie, Constance Maskery, Jill Milkert, Lind Miller,  
Lou Mitchell, Karol Morris, Melissa Nelson, Dorothy Pearson,  
Erik Pedersen, Janet Pink, Melanie Platz, Robin Rohrmoser,  
Camilla Turner, Heather Warren,  
Arlene Wells, Tara Wells

Published by British Columbia Hansard Services, and printed under the authority of the Speaker by the Queen's Printer, Victoria. Rates: single issue, \$2.85; per calendar year, mailed daily, \$298. GST extra. Agent: Crown Publications Inc., 521 Fort St., Victoria, B.C. V8W 1E7. Telephone: (250) 386-4636. Fax: 386-0221.

[www.leg.bc.ca](http://www.leg.bc.ca)

Hansard Services publishes transcripts both in print and on the Internet.  
Chamber debates are broadcast on television and webcast on the Internet.  
Question Period podcasts are available on the Internet.