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| ***Province*** | ***Législature*** | ***Session*** | ***Type de discours*** | ***Date du discours*** | ***Locuteur*** | ***Fonction du locuteur*** | ***Parti politique*** |
| Alberta | 17e | 3e | Étude des crédits du ministère de l’Éducation | 4 juin 1974 | M. Louis D. Hyndman | Ministre de l’Éducation et leader parlementaire du gouvernement | PC |

**Mr. Hyndman:** Mr. Chairman, I believe a number of members opposite posed quite a number of intriguing and mostly helpful questions. Others were intriguing but not so helpful. However, I would like to try to answer briefly and respond to some of the items raised.

First, with regard to the proposal relating to the document which I passed around, there certainly has been consultation with ASTA. I have met with various members of their executive committee on three occasions. Members of my department have done so, and we intend to develop this plan in conjunction with them over the course of the next four or five months since they are the people who are being elected.

Secondly, the question of teachers who retired before 1970 was raised by a number of hone members. I think it was gracious of the hone Leader of the Opposition to admit that that was perhaps an error which he made. I make errors myself. However, the point is not whether an error was made, the point is the equity of the situation with regard to these ladies. The question was asked as to whether there was a precedent. It appears that there was a precedent in Manitoba. We are following that up in more detail now, and before too long I hope we can arrive at a solution which will be satisfactory to the group, but which will not prejudice existing and other pension plans in respect of the actuarial realities.

On the small-school grant, I would agree that it is a start. It's meant to be simply a start. I could see a possibility that it would increase in future years as we gain experience as to whether it is doing the job in assisting the rural school divisions which need it most. Certainly the question of declining enrolment is perhaps an input which we would have to increase in that grant as the months go by.

On the question of building regulations, it was asked as to whether there are any special allowances with regard to new and fast-growing areas. Those have been allowed and are present in the new regulations which have been available for the past few months. For example, if an area can show growth of, say, 10 per cent - and there are very few areas in the province which have that growth rate, some of them are up to 20 - then it has an extra measure of relief and can apply for and secure approval for a school much more quickly and more easily than a normal school division. Quite properly the suggestion was made that we should allow for that, and we have done so.

[Regarding] the question of the number of spaces available, the figure of 100,000 spaces in my recollection refers, in effect, to desk spaces available. If we wanted to educate [students] with some degree of administrative organization we could educate in this province in the schools existing today 520,000 students. We have 420,000 students, and that's dropping to 391,000 students in 1978. This is why we find members of the public saying, well, if it's dropping by 30,000, why are you building any schools at all? Admittedly one can't go to that extreme. So that's why the situation in school buildings a judicious balance we are trying to maintain is being carried forward.

On the subject of school trustees and the question as to whether they are or should be masters of their own destinies, I think if members opposite and trustees read The School Act as it now exists they will find that there are many powers there which, really, they haven't used as yet.

I think the record shows that since 1971 we have been moving gradually towards a reduction of the restrictions in terms of supplementary requisition that trustees have had. One fact must remain though and must be remembered, and that is to ask ourselves the question, who is accountable and who is considered accountable by the people of this province in major matters concerning education? There is a feeling among a million or more Albertans that when something goes wrong, occasionally when something goes right but particularly when something goes wrong, it is the Minister of Education primarily and with great frequency to whom people come. So I think the question of accountability is one which we have to remember.

In that connection, though, of trustee independence, there is one suggestion I would like to see trustees take up. That relates to the question of separate tax notices. It seems to me that the body which is going to spend public tax moneys should be raising public tax moneys and should be personally, or should have delivered to the people who paid the taxes in a direct way the notice that says that such and such a group is raising taxes for a certain purpose.

At the moment that is done usually through the municipal body. In my view, trustees would be wise to consider issuing separate tax notices - and I think they could still use the administrative procedure of the municipal authority - so that there is a very direct link between the body that spends the taxpayers' money and the body that raises it.

On the question of competition within the public and Catholic systems, this is allied in a way to the suggestions made on private schools. I think that what we have seen in the last few months is really the development of alternatives and choices within the public and Catholic systems. I think traditionally these were thought to have been fairly rigid. We have now in Edmonton two schools that are alternative schools which are following a program very different than any we have known before, emphasizing academic excellence and discipline. This is being carried on now in Calgary; the program was recently announced. As minister I would like to encourage this all over the province, these kinds of alternatives within the existing systems.

Mention was made about private schools. Perhaps I should just outline the fact that we are certainly not forgetting them. The increases for elementary students in terms of funding were $172, up 20 per cent for elementary students, 32 per cent for junior high students and 93 per cent for high school students. It's still not equal, but it certainly does provide a degree of relief.

On the question of autistic children, I think the suggestion by the Member for Cardston of being sensitive to the very special problem that is undergone by the parents of these children is one which we have been looking at and will continue to keep as a priority in respect of children who have handicaps.

The other suggestion made by the hone member related to the size of school divisions. It was suggested that smaller ones would be more useful. recollection of educational history in this province is that it was Mr. William Aberhart who in 1936 found the province with over 500 school divisions and decided they should be telescoped down to what now, I think, 145 and about 45 that we call dummy school districts. It's hard to decide or exercise a judgment as to what the right size is, but certainly we wouldn't see making any moves towards consolidating them or making them any bigger. There have been moves by the boards in the area of Drumheller to perhaps consolidate on a certain basis and a gradual agreed upon consolidation, if there is to be one, is what we would look for.

The Member for Wainwright raised the question of the extent to which rural and urban students are receiving equal treatment. I think, perhaps, the best indicator which comes to mind is the fact that very recently an Alberta rural public school won the national Canadian award on the Reach for the Top program, as mentioned by the Member for Drumheller. It is, I am sure, coincidental that that was a school from Barrhead, but I think that does indicate - it's hard to judge - that the quality of program delivery which we are aiming for is the same for urban and rural. There is certainly a way to go. We have certain programs that are specifically for rural areas. For example, the learning disability program is very largely in that area, but there's more to do there.

I would have to take issue though with the hone Member for Wainwright in his suggestion that there is perhaps some obligation on the Minister of Education to send out to every school jurisdiction in the province a copy of The School Act. I think it is one of the responsibilities of the Alberta School Trustees' Association to get and to follow up any legislation or regulations and then pass those out to the various member school boards around the province. I know the ASTA wants to grow and become more of a feature and have more of an impact on education life in Alberta. I think they have been doing this increasingly over the past two or three years. So it does seem to me that that is essentially their obligation and I am happy to have them do that in future.

The hon. Member for Highwood raised a number of questions about innovative projects and I realize there is one in his area which has drawn some comment. These projects were started essentially under my predecessor. A number of them are ongoing. As to the number that have been implemented, I am not sure - I think somewhere in the range of 50 or upwards. But they are initiated by a request from the local school board. They are not imposed by the department. The parameters of a study and its purpose are requested by the local school board just as has occurred in the Foothills School Division in the honourable gentleman's riding. So the local school board implements [them] after having asked for and received approval for the program.

The funding is shared. In respect to the one in the High River riding, about 60 per cent is paid by the government, approximately $45,000 I believe, and the balance in a direct and indirect way by the local school board. They are evaluated by the department and by the local board. My understanding is that the program in the Foothills School Division will be ending in the spring of 1975 and there will be an evaluation then, the final one of the… [Inaudible]… year program. Certainly I am sure that is something which should be shared with the hone member.

The hon. Opposition leader raised a question concerning the government's approach on public [and] separate school beard assessments. This is a situation we are looking at on a phased-in basis. What will essentially happen is that the corporate portion of the supplementary requisition, the revenue there, will move towards equalization by essentially administrative changes and the injections of provincial dollars. We don't know exactly how much that will be, because we don't have any information as yet from various divisions on assessment. But it could be in the range of $11 million, if one is going to move into that in 197~. This would in effect extend the principles of equity and fairness that have been developed and have been increasing in the School Foundation program over the past two decades.

The hon. member also suggested the use of excess school facilities. I am just completing a document to send to school boards suggesting alternative uses of school buildings, which I might be able to table tomorrow. We've been moving in this direction. For example, hone members know that the Agricultural Development Corporation in Camrose is housed in a school. A number of other recreational facilities, the J. Percy Page Centre in St. Albert, were a school. This is one of the areas where we're trying to make it clear to all jurisdictions that these schools are available, can be used and are in the community.

On the question of busing, concern was expressed particularly for small children. That is our priority. We try, with regard to the children from an age of four and a half early childhood programs to grade 4 - to insure they will have a neighborhood school, preferably within walking distance. With the core concept, the portable school concept, this is possible. We are not likely to approve permanent older design schools, for example, in the higher grades unless the school board has demonstrated it has looked at using as an alternative. But for those lower grades, the hone member is right in suggesting they should have priority in having a school in their nearby community.

We haven't been suggesting that boards should simply move from school construction to housing en masse. We simply said that those two alternatives, plus six or seven others like redrawing of attendance boundaries, should all be looked at with a view to judicious balance, in terms of the use of these facilities, because tax payers are wondering why there is still a need to build new schools with this 30,000 drop we are going to experience over the next four years. I think it is settling down with the new flexible programs of core schools and portable schools, and that with the experience which is now being gained the programs will now settle down. But they will bear watching over the next few months.

The other point raised was one about communications, the question of being able to read, learn and inwardly digest the English language. That is an area where we detected a soft spot in 1972. It is for that reason that the $12 million program to upgrade the basics of reading, writing and arithmetic in the first six grades was started by the government as an initiative last year. It may be some time before the results are known but I think it is an area that we are sensitive to and we will continue to work on.

As to the priority of that in the school system, one of the problems is that society, over the past 20 years, has really dumped so much on the school systems and required them to do so much more than the basic concept of education 20 years ago, that they are having a very great difficulty in trying to do all the jobs at once. In my view, some of those jobs should be returned to the parents. The question of parent education is one which we will be moving into in Early Childhood over the course of the next few years.