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| ***Province*** | ***Législature*** | ***Session*** | ***Type de discours*** | ***Date du discours*** | ***Locuteur*** | ***Fonction du locuteur*** | ***Parti politique*** |
| Alberta | 26e  | 3e  | Remarques préliminaires à l’étude des crédits du ministère de l’Éducation | 17 mai 2007 | M. Ron Liepert | Ministre de l’Éducation | PC |

**Mr. Liepert:** Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. Today I am pleased to present the Education budget for the 2007-2008 fiscal year. Before I do, I should again introduce my deputy minister, Keray Henke. We did have the opportunity yesterday to answer a number of questions from our opposition members, and hopefully we’ll get to answer the rest of them today.

This year’s budget totals just over $5.6 billion, which is an increase of $195 million or 5.2 per cent more funds for the classroom over the previous year. Some specifics are: $4.2 billion in operating support to school boards, $357 million for the teachers’ pension plan, $144 million for accredited private schools, $87 million for basic education programs that support school boards such as the learning resource centre, high-speed networking, technology, and provincial Microsoft licensing, those sorts of items.

There’s $86 million for program and ministry support – that, of course, being our department – and $925 million for school facilities. I want to repeat that: almost a billion dollars for infrastructure, which includes $417 million for plant operations and maintenance and $508 million for the infrastructure portion of that expenditure.

All school authorities will receive a 3 per cent increase in operational grants for the 2007-2008 school year. In addition, other grant adjustments reflect the initial planning and development of strategies to address the three priorities in the Premier’s mandate letter. Of course, they are explore early learning opportunities, improve high school completion rates, find a reasonable solution to the teacher’s unfunded pension liability, and a fourth one that I’ve added, which is build schools where students live and learn.

Seven million dollars this year is going to be added to provide early learning opportunities for children as young as three and a half with English as a Second Language programming. Early childhood services programs for children aged three and a half to six years with mild or moderate special needs or as young as two and a half to six years with severe needs are available for children who are enrolled in a recognized program, whether at their local school or an accredited private ECS operator such as Head Start.

A $2 million dollar increase is to extend English as a Second Language funding to accredited private schools; $4.5 million is to support improvements toward existing career and technology studies, facilities, and equipment; a $33 million increase for special-needs funding; an $11 million increase in transportation funding and continuation of the 15 and a half million dollar fuel price contingency fund; $6 million in new funding for technology initiatives, including more video conferencing suites; $9 million for enhancing teachers’ skills and abilities and the implementation of new curricula, which includes the third year of social studies implementation and the first year of math implementation.

Provincial support for the small class size initiative will increase by $35 million, which is a 21.7 per cent increase, and that’s for the retention of 2,500 new teachers who were hired under the initiative to maintain reduced class sizes. This brings funding to $194.5 million this fiscal year, which will provide all school jurisdictions with a 3 per cent increase in their class size funding. The total government funding for CSI to date is about one-half billion dollars, almost $500 million to reduce class sizes throughout Alberta schools.

In addition, the government continues its support for innovation and student learning through its $73 million commitment to the Alberta initiative for school improvement, better known as AISI. Students and young children with special health needs will also benefit from the continued investment of more than $44 million to the 17 student health partnerships across the province. These partnerships provide access to health care professionals and related support services. Under Budget 2007 funding for the student health initiative will increase from $41.7 million to $44.2 million, an increase of two and a half million dollars, or some 6 per cent.

I’d like to deal briefly with school infrastructure. The government has provided significant funding for school infrastructure in the past and continues to do so. A total of nearly $1.3 billion over the next three years has been allocated for previously announced projects. The 2007-2010 capital plan includes funding for 71 previously announced new or major modernization projects, including 12 schools to be opened in 2007-2008. An additional 8,226 new student spaces will be opening in this coming school year across the province. In the 2007-2008 budget a total of $508 million is allocated for school facilities infrastructure, with $96 million directed toward the infrastructure maintenance and renewal grants to school boards for school building upgrades or to improve school energy efficiency.

The capital plan also includes an additional $300 million over the next three years, which has not yet been allocated to individual school projects. The government will examine alternative procurement methods to deliver school infrastructure, and this allocation of $100 million per year over the next three years should help to drive some creative solutions for school construction. Treasury Board is taking a lead in planning on behalf of government.

I’d like to deal briefly with the teachers’ unfunded pension liability. It’s one of the priorities the Premier assigned to me. The teachers’ contribution to their portion of the pre-1992 liability is and will continue to be a disincentive to teachers because just over half of the teachers in the system today did not have any role in its creation, and there is a feeling by those teachers that they should not be responsible for solving it. Paying off the past liability can be and is a barrier to the recruitment and retention of teachers.

In 1992 the government of Alberta agreed to pay two-thirds of the liability, which now stands at $4.3 billion, while teachers accepted to pay for one-third, which is now $2.1 billion. This totals $6.4 billion and is increasing every day. At present contribution rates the liability will grow to about $14 billion by 2044, and it won’t be paid off until 2060. This means an increasing number of young teachers will pay for the pre-1992 liability for the next five decades.

I presented the ATA with an open and clear process for resolving this issue. A task force will be struck to research and consider options to address the teachers’ share of the unfunded pre-1992 pension liability, and as a sign of good faith the government of Alberta will assume for one year 100 per cent of contributions for teachers with up to five years’ experience, which equates to approximately $1,400 on a salary of $50,000 annually. Seventy-five per cent of the contributions will be paid for teachers with six to 10 years’ experience, which equates to approximately $1,300 on a salary of $60,000 annually. For teachers with 11 to 15 years of experience the government will pick up 50 per cent of their contribution, again, approximately $1,200 on a salary of $75,000 annually. Finally, 25 per cent of the contributions for teachers with 16 to 20 years of experience will be accepted by government, and that equates to approximately $650 on a salary of $80,000 annually.

This approach addresses the fact that our youngest and newest teachers are the most disadvantaged by paying for a liability they did not create. This initiative is intended to create an environment that allows the task force to have a positive and constructive dialogue with the various stakeholders. This liability is the responsibility of both parties and needs to be addressed in an open and transparent manner. We’re looking for fiscally responsible solutions that provide value to Alberta students, teachers, and taxpayers with specific attention to the recruitment and retention of new teachers.

I believe that Budget 2007 sustains our excellent education system and manages areas of growth. Our department business plan provides particular focus to the four priorities. Education is about innovation, outcomes, student success, and collaboration. Everyone has a role, and that’s why I’ve listened and discussed education matters with a range of individuals and associations. All of our futures depend on what happens in the K to 12 system, so I intend to reach out beyond the usual education community and talk with business leaders and other decision-makers.

Since my appointment I have met with school board chairs, trustees, principals, teachers, parents, and students. Those meetings have been open and honest, and I’ve had some excellent discussions about school jurisdictions’ local challenges as well as opportunities involving collaboration and innovation in delivering education. I’m impressed by the good work going on in our education community. I’m supportive of and strongly believe in locally elected officials and their ability and responsibility to make decisions that are in the best interest of their community.

In closing, I want to emphasize that this budget underlines government’s commitment to manage growth and the need to have a plan for the future. I would entertain any comments or questions for the remainder of the estimates period.

Thank you.