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| ***Province*** | ***Législature*** | ***Session*** | ***Type de discours*** | ***Date du discours*** | ***Locuteur*** | ***Fonction du locuteur*** | ***Parti politique*** |
| Alberta | 27e | 1re | Remarques préliminaires à l’étude des crédits du ministère de l’Éducation | 24 avril 2008 | M. Dave Hancock | Ministre de l’Éducation et leader du gouvernement | PC |

**Mr. Hancock:** Mr. Chairman, I’m pleased to start by sharing with you details of the Alberta Education budget for the 2008-09 fiscal year, which is part of Budget 2008, presented by the hon. Minister of Finance and Enterprise on Tuesday.

Our mission at Alberta Education is to show leadership and to work with our stakeholders to make sure that students can find their passions and develop the knowledge, skills, and attributes that they need for lifelong learning, work, and citizenship. We have an excellent team at the department. In the short period of time I’ve come to know them, they’ve been educating me well, I hope. This, perhaps, is the test today, the assessment for learning.

The direction and leadership of our deputy minister, Keray Henke, has been very important. Unfortunately, Keray is unable to join us today as he is in Paris leading the Canadian delegation to the OECD’s education policy committee, Alberta providing leadership abroad.

I am joined on the floor this afternoon by Jim Dueck, acting deputy minister as well as assistant deputy minister for accountability and reporting; Nancy Stewart, acting assistant deputy minister, strategic services; Gene Williams, executive director, strategic financial services; Kathy Telfer, communications director; and George Lee, acting director of budget and fiscal analysis. We also have other members of our team with us in the gallery today: Wilma Haas, assistant deputy minister of learning supports; Debby Johnston, acting assistant deputy minister, program development and standards; Carol McLean, executive director of people resources; and Michael Walter, executive director of field services. Also joining us on the floor is my executive assistant, Sean Yam. A very good team of people.

Of course, Mr. Chairman, colleagues in the Legislature will know that this team of people represents through them a very strong organization in the Department of Education who work with stakeholders across the province, with school boards and teachers, to make sure that we can provide that world-class education that we aspire to.

Alberta’s kindergarten to grade 12 education system is grounded in a set of principles which are identified in the 2008-11 business plan. The principles are student centred. The highest priority of the education system is the success of each student.

Leadership: Alberta is a leader in academic excellence so that all students can find their passions and achieve their potential. Accessible: every student in Alberta has the right of access to quality basic education consistent with the student’s needs and abilities. It’s responsive: the education system is flexible, anticipates student needs, and provides opportunities for parent and student choice. It’s innovative: the education system demonstrates leading-edge innovation in supporting improved student learning outcomes. It’s collaborative: the foundation for lifelong learning best occurs when partners and stakeholders work together to provide a holistic approach and a supportive environment. It is equitable: all students have equitable access to quality learning opportunities. And it is accountable: all those involved in the education system are accountable to Albertans for quality results, system sustainability, and fiscal responsibility.

Mr. Chairman, Albertans have high expectations of the education system. Everyone has attended school in one manner or another, and that experience shaped our own opinions about education. As a society we expect the education system to prepare our students to succeed in a future of unlimited possibilities. In order to serve our students well, we need to be focused on the strategic priorities as identified in our business plan.

In addition to the ministry’s core activities, we have the following strategies in place to address seven areas of concern. Participation and completion rates: growing the technology and science sectors will require increasing student participation and completion rates in health, math, science, and career and technology studies courses. We want success for all students. We want to ensure that the education system continues to expand its capacity to remain adaptable, innovative, and responsive to the current and emerging needs of students for today and tomorrow. First Nations, Métis, and Inuit students’ success is important, and we’re focusing on improving the educational attainment of those students in provincially funded schools.

We’re strengthening the education sector workforce. This means taking a proactive approach to emerging pressures in the education workforce to ensure that we have a child- and youth-centred workforce with the best people in the right places at the right times with the right skills to meet learner needs.

Enhancing relationships. Continual improvement of our education system requires developing new opportunities and approaches to engage stakeholders and communities across the province. It also ensures that our education system is responsive to the changing needs of Albertans.

Schools where students live and learn. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona was asking me about this afternoon, and it is an essential part of where we’re going with the future in education. We’re working in partnership with Infrastructure and Treasury Board to assess financing strategies for school construction to ensure that schools are available where students live. Of course, we need to work with school boards with respect to how they use their physical resources and assets to make sure that they have the best learning opportunities available for students where those students are.

Access to learning opportunities and intervention for at-risk students. As the learning that occurs in a child’s first few years has a profound influence on his or her success in school and future quality of life, the ministry is enhancing its collaborative approach to early learning and care. As well, the ministry will increase broad-based supports and early intervention initiatives for at-risk children to improve their learning outcomes.

With these principles and strategies in mind, Mr. Chairman, I’m both pleased and honoured to present the ministry’s budget estimates and business plans. In the budget estimates we note that there are six programs that will be referenced in the budget this year. Our voted estimates begin on page 129 of the estimates book.

We have two primary funding streams that are important to note. The first stream is what we call voted government and lottery fund estimates, which total $4.2 billion, or about 70 per cent of the budget, which we’ll be voting on later in the session. Today education property taxes, which total about $1.7 billion, comprise the second funding stream, accounting for 27.5 per cent of our budget. About $1.5 billion of that $1.7 billion resides in the Alberta school foundation fund, which is governed by statute. The remainder of about $187 million goes to local separate school boards that choose to collect their education property taxes directly from their municipalities. In addition, $150 million has been allocated to statutory expense for the initial payments towards the ASAP program, the Alberta school alternative procurement. The $4.2 billion in voted estimates, the $1.7 billion in education property taxes, and the $150 million in statutory expenses for ASAP bring the support for K to 12 to just over $6 billion.

The first program is ministry support services, the corporate function of the department, and that, Mr. Chairman, is self-explanatory. Program 2, operating support for public and separate schools, will increase by $212 million, or 4.4 per cent, to $5.1 billion. This money will go almost entirely towards increased grant funding for 62 school jurisdictions and 12 chartered schools. One hundred and nine million dollars of this increase is the general revenue fund portion of support to school boards. Another $103 million in support comes from the education property taxes.

Operating support for public and separate schools includes grant dollars for the funding framework. This framework provides boards with operating funds, giving them the necessary flexibility to meet local priorities, and provides the differential or additional funding to address cost differences that are beyond the control of an individual school board. On average school jurisdictions will receive a 4.7 per cent increase in funding for the 2008-2009 year, which reflects an operational grant increase of 4.53 per cent, and higher funding percentage increases to provincial initiatives such as the small class size initiative at 9 per cent and student health at 6 per cent. In comparison the cost-of-living increase is expected to be 3.4 per cent.

Some of the specifics. English as a Second Language support increases by $12 million, to $70.6 million. This funding will allow school authorities to provide ESL programs for children as young as three and a half years of age through to grade 12. It includes the grant increase of 4.53 per cent as well as addressing an increasing number of students requiring these programs. Over the last five years, it should be noted, ESL program support has increased by 138 per cent, from $29.6 million in 2004-05 to $70.6 million in 2008-09, perhaps a reflection, Mr. Chairman, of the nature of change that’s happening in our province.

Transportation funding increases by 6.7 per cent, or $16.6 million, from $246 million to $263.3 million, which will provide boards with a 4.53 per cent increase in transportation grant rates, as well as $19.5 million in fuel price contingency funding, a $4 million increase, to address the high cost of fuel. School boards receive additional funding to cover every cent increase that the price of fuel is above 60 cents per litre. That’s diesel fuel, I believe.

Special-needs support for early childhood to grade 12 students with special needs increases by $30 million, to $451 million. It’s funding which recognizes the additional costs of providing specialized programs. The budget will also provide support to important provincial initiatives such as the small class size initiative, the Alberta initiative for school improvement, or AISI, and the student health initiative partnerships.

Under small class size we’ll continue to provide targeted funding to assist boards in reaching class size averages. Funding for this initiative increases by 9 per cent, or $17.5 million, to $212 million in Budget 2008. Since the start of this initiative boards have made significant progress. However, class-size averages in kindergarten to grade 3 present the largest challenges for school boards, and we’re encouraging school boards to focus on ensuring that our youngest students benefit from the smaller class sizes.

Support for AISI increases by 4.7 per cent, or $3.5 million, to $77 million. It’s money which supports great innovation in local projects that help improve student learning and performance. Our emphasis is going to be on the importance of sharing the learning experiences and the research from AISI among educators in the province. There is an annual AISI conference in February and a clearing house on the department website, which are just two ways in which teachers share their knowledge and help to improve learning for students.

The student health initiative support increases by 6 per cent, or $2.7 million, to $47 million, to provide students with special health needs increased access to integrated specialized support services.

We also have specific initiatives which will be funded to the tune of more than $80 million in strategic priority areas such as improving high school completion rates, providing learning and teaching through increased access to classroom technologies, and providing an education system that’s adaptable to meet the current and emerging needs of students. Over the next three years more than $260 million will be invested in specific initiatives to improve the learning outcomes for children at risk and expand the education opportunities for all students. We’re finalizing details now on new funding supports for integration of technology in Alberta classrooms, CTS equipment upgrading and curriculum development, additional supports to assist students who are visually impaired, distributed learning courseware, and strategies for early intervention for our youngest students.

We’re making great progress in meeting the facility needs for students, with over 7,000 new student spaces opening in the 2008- 2009 school year. The ministry will provide $624 million for school infrastructure in 2008-2009 and more than $1.6 billion over the next three years. I can still remember when a former colleague from Innisfail, Gary Severtson, led the new century school program and proposed that we needed to invest $1.5 billion. We’ve done that, and we’ve done significantly more than that, but there’s still a high need. In the budget documents presented, the program line indicates $473,513,000. That does not include the statutory component of $150 million for the ASAP procurement initiative.

The 2008-11 capital plan also includes 32 new schools to be built through public-private partnerships. Phase 1 provides 18 schools in Edmonton and Calgary, expected to open as early as September 2010, and phase 2 will provide 14 new schools in the communities of Calgary, Edmonton, Okotoks, Langdon, Spruce Grove, and Sherwood Park. Budget 2008 also includes $96 million for infrastructure maintenance and renewal funding to improve and prolong the life of our school buildings.

Sixty-three million dollars for program delivery support services includes curriculum development, student assessment, and other stakeholder supports such as capital planning, field services, and French language services.

Basic education programs: $104 million for basic education includes the Learning Resources Centre, high-speed network, French language programs, and technologies such as video conferencing. A $5 million increase is mainly for high-speed network to bring SuperNet into the schools and to cover operating costs.

Private schools, Mr. Chairman, are an important part of the education system and will receive the same 4.53 per cent increase that the public schools have received. But it’s important for me to acknowledge that there has been significant pressure and input from the operators of private schools, and they are certainly looking for more assistance in the funding area, particularly in operations and maintenance but also in the overall funding, which is now at 60 per cent of the public school funding. That will be a part of the larger discussion as we go forward with respect to education in the province.

Every day, Mr. Chairman, teachers connect with students in classrooms, online via video conferencing, or by some other means, and we need to continue to support our teachers on the front lines, recognize the great work that they do and the impact that they’re having on our students’ lives.

Education, I think people can see from this budget, continues to be a priority for this government. People from around the world look at Alberta for what’s happening here and the leadership that this province is providing in the area of excellence in education. But there’s a lot more that we can do, and we will continue to find ways to make sure that every student in Alberta – each student in Alberta – can find their passion, can meet their potential, and can be successful.