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| ***Province*** | ***Législature*** | ***Session*** | ***Type de discours*** | ***Date du discours*** | ***Locuteur*** | ***Fonction du locuteur*** | ***Parti politique*** |
| Alberta | 27e | 4e | Remarques préliminaires à l’étude des crédits du ministère de l’Éducation | 19 avril 2011 | M. Dave Hancock | Ministre de l’Éducation | PC |

**Mr. Hancock:** Thank you, Mr. Chairman. It is a privilege to be in front of the Committee of Supply to defend the estimates for the Department of Education for the 2011-12 year. I’d like to start by introducing and acknowledging the staff that are with me: first of all, Deputy Minister Keray Henke; our assistant deputy minister of strategic services, Michael Walter; director of finance, Gene Williams; and director of budget and fiscal analysis, George Lee. I want to start by saying thank you to these staff members and, through them, to all of the people who work in the Department of Education.

Over the course of the three years now that I’ve had the opportunity and privilege to work, I can tell you that we have dedicated professionals who are committed to the children of this province and who are committed to making sure, particularly with respect to the people who are with me today, that the financial resources that are allocated to the Department of Education are used efficiently, effectively, and in the interests of ensuring that each and every child in this province has the opportunity to get the best education possible to maximize their personal potential and to be able to grow up to be good citizens and to contribute back to their community. These people are very definitely contributing back to their community in a most substantial way, so I wanted to start by saying thank you.

The financial side is never easy. It wasn’t easy this year. It’s not been an easy time, and I have with me people who have worked very, very long and hard to put together this budget but also to work with our stakeholders and people in the system, right throughout the system, to make sure that with the resources we have, we can make the most effective use so that every child can get a good education.

Mr. Chairman, our business is driven by our three-year business plan, focused on the goals, priority initiatives, and measures of the ministry. Goal 1 is success for every student, goal 2 is transformed education through collaboration, and goal 3 is success for First Nation, Métis, and Inuit students. Anyone interested in more in-formation on the business plan I would encourage to go to the department’s website, where you can see the business plan, which is very streamlined this year in accordance with the process that has been used across government, but also our Action On agenda, which is a companion action document that works with the business plan to show where we’re going as a department and where we see the system going as part of our Inspiring Education process and as part of the results that we’ve achieved in terms of the consultations and the direction that we’re setting.

We’re here today to debate the estimates for Education and the commitments made to sustainable funding for education programs and services that our children and students need and which we need to maintain our quality of life. Our decisions were all made within the context of addressing fiscal challenges and responsible decisions for the future that in the long term contribute to the rich quality of life that we enjoy in Alberta. We’ve never shied away from the fact that this budget does pose challenges for education. Our number one priority is to remain focused on our efforts at ensuring that we’re truly enhancing student success through sup-ports in the classroom, curriculum development, special programs, and capital planning. We will continue to rely on local school board leadership to make the best decisions for students and communities.

Decisions need to be based not on our old ways, not on continuing what we’ve always done but on what our research tells us is best for our children. Education is an investment, but like with all investments we only have finite dollars. I’m determined to put those dollars where research says it will have the greatest return for our students.

For the fiscal year 2011-12 Education’s total support for the ECS to 12 education system reaches nearly $6.4 billion under Budget 2011, an increase of $258 million in operational support to boards, or 4.4 per cent. The $258 million increase will fulfill the government’s commitment by funding teachers’ salary increases and associated pension increases, finish off the commitments made in the 2010-11 school year, and address expected student enrolment increases and other changes to student demographics.

There are six programs that will be referenced in this year’s budget. Our voted estimates begin on page 102 of the estimates book. We had two primary funding streams that are important to note: the voted government and lottery fund estimates, totalling about $4.2 billion, or about 68 per cent of the ministry budget, which we’ll be voting on later in the session, and education property taxes, which total about $1.8 billion. About $1.6 billion of this amount resides in the Alberta school foundation fund, which is governed by statute, and the remaining $202 million goes to local separate school boards that choose to collect their education property taxes directly from their municipalities. In addition, $44.6 million is allocated to statutory expense for the work in progress with the Alberta schools alternative procurement, or ASAP schools, and $299 million is the statutory expense for government contributions made to the teachers’ pension plan.

The breakdown of the ministry’s six programs begins on page 102. The first program in our budget, ministry support services, represents the corporate functions of the department.

The second program is the operating support for public and separate schools. The voted portion of this program increases to $3.59 billion. When the nonvoted amount from education property tax and the statutory obligation for teachers’ pensions are included, operating support to public and separate schools increases by $258 million to $5.7 billion. This increase will provide support to school boards to complete the 2010-11 school year, provide the necessary supports for the ’11-12 school year to address expected student enrolment increases and other changes to student demographics and programming.

On budget day we announced that the student-based instruction grant will increase by 4.4 per cent, as would the rate for a revised class size grant for the 2011-12 year. This increase reflected the preliminary average weekly earnings index, as it was known at that time, and the index’s basis for teachers’ salary increases to be effective September 1, 2011. Since then, Statistics Canada has confirmed that the official Alberta average weekly earnings index is 4.54 per cent.

In the process of making that confirmation, they’ve actually again changed the way they calculate the numbers slightly. In any event, I believe that the 4.54 per cent is the agreed-upon number. We have informed school boards that the rate on these two grants will be adjusted accordingly. This government is honouring its commitment to the teachers as per the five-year agreement be-tween the government of Alberta and the Alberta Teachers’ Association.

The government has not only sustained but grown its investment on the class size initiative over the past three years. To date the government has invested nearly $1.4 billion since this initiative began in 2004. In Budget 2011 funding for the class size initiative continues with an investment of $228 million. While funding for the class size initiative continues to grow in this budget, effective September 1, 2011, class size funding for grades 4 to 6 will be eliminated. We are addressing student needs by adjusting the class size initiative funding to a per-pupil grant for kindergarten to grade 3, recognizing that small class sizes are most beneficial to students in their early years.

Mr. Chairman, we’re not reducing the class size initiative funding at all. In fact, it’s increasing slightly, but we are reprofiling it because the research would show that class size, while it’s important in many areas, does not affect student outcome in the higher grades, but it could have an impact on K to 3, and that’s the area where we’re not meeting the class size guidelines yet in the province. We’ve reprofiled the class size initiative funding albeit school boards can still use their funding however they want when they get it. We’ve profiled it to fund class size and class size growth at the K to 3 level as well as tiering the grants as we did last year to CTS funding in high schools, where smaller class sizes are necessary, particularly if there’s a safety issue. This was particularly important as we expect the number of kindergarten to grade 3 students to increase significantly over the next five years.

While considering class size average guidelines, we need to recognize that there is no one-size-fits-all solution. Class composition, grade level, and teacher experience should be considered by school administrators in setting class size. The revised class size formula continues to allocate enhanced funding levels for specific career and technology studies, as I mentioned.

The budget also provides funding to school boards for the first seven months of the 2011-12 year, a projected provincial student enrolment growth of approximately 6,100 students, or 1.1 per cent, and supports any changes to student demographics in areas such as English as a second language, FNMI, and mild and moderate student populations.

Transportation funding increases by $1 million, totalling $260 million for the 2011-12 year, which will be targeted to address the challenges of transporting students in sparsely populated rural areas.

We’re increasing funding to support students with severe dis-abilities by $12 million, or 4.4 per cent, in this fiscal year. School jurisdictions will receive the same level of funding to support the severe disability profiles this year as they did last. The additional allocation will be used to build an inclusive education system to help ensure success for all students. At a later date we will provide additional detail about the leadership and guidance that will be available to support school authorities in their work on building an inclusive education system and an allocation of the $12 million.

I stated earlier that this is not an easy budget and that hard decisions had to be made. Two grants, the relative cost of purchasing goods and services adjustment and the stabilization grant, are being phased out. Both grants will be reduced by 50 per cent starting September 1 and then eliminated beginning September 1, 2012.

For our CPA . . . [A timer sounded] Is that . . .

[Fin du temps accordé pour les remarques préliminaires]