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| ***Province*** | ***Législature*** | ***Session*** | ***Type de discours*** | ***Date du discours*** | ***Locuteur*** | ***Fonction du locuteur*** | ***Parti politique*** |
| Alberta | 27e | 5e | Remarques préliminaires à l’étude des crédits du ministère de l’Éducation | 6 mars 2012 | M. Thomas Lukaszuk | Ministre de l’Éducation | PC |

**Mr. Lukaszuk:** Well, thank you, Mr. Chairman. It’s a pleasure and an honour to be here before you and before our colleagues in the committee. Joining me today in the Chamber are Deputy Minister of Alberta Education Mr. Keray Henke; Mr. Michael Walter, assistant deputy minister of strategic services; and Gene Williams, executive director of strategic financial services. Up in the gallery listening very attentively and cheering us on are Ellen Hambrook, assistant deputy minister of education program standards and assessment; George Lee, director of budget and fiscal analysis; Kenneth Poon, senior manager of corporate budgets; and Janice Schroeder, director of communications. I’d say hello to all of them.

Mr. Chairman, I would like to present the ministry’s 2012-2015 budget estimates and business plan. There are five programs in the budget. Our vote estimates begin on page 63 of the estimates book. We have two primary funding streams that are important to note, the government and lottery fund estimates, totalling about $4.4 billion, or about 65 per cent of the budget, which we will be voting on later in this session; and the education property taxes, which total approximately $2 billion. Approximately $1.8 billion of this amount resides in the Alberta school foundation fund. The remaining $270 million goes to local separate school boards that choose to collect their education property taxes directly from their municipalities. These amounts are outlined on page 65 of the estimates.

Mr. Chairman, in addition, $26 million is allocated to a work-in-progress for Alberta schools alternative procurement, or ASAP, schools and $327 million . . . Did I read something wrong?

[…]

Just in case anybody missed it, Mr. Chairman, in addition, $26 million is allocated to a work-in-progress for the Alberta schools alternative procurement, or ASAP, schools and $327 million for the teachers’ pension plan. These nonvote amounts are outlined on page 69 of the estimates.

When you combine the $4.4 billion voted in estimates, the $2 billion in education property taxes, and the $353 million in statutory expenses, support for the K to 12 education system reaches nearly $6.8 billion and will grow to about $7.1 billion over the next three years.

Excluding capital, the ministry’s operating budget, Mr. Chairman, increased – and I have to underline increased – by $216 million, or 3.5 per cent, this year; $213 million, or 3.3 per cent, the following year; and $245 million, or 3.7 per cent, in 2014-2015. As desired by Albertans, for the first time in the history of this province we have a three-year predictable budget.

The breakdown of the ministry’s five programs begins on page 64. One, ministry support services, the first program in our budget, represents the corporate function of the department. This program increases by 3 per cent due to the provision of a 4 per cent salary settlement. Two, operating support for public and separate schools, the second program: the voted portion of this program is $3.8 billion. If you include the nonvote amounts from education property taxes and the statutory obligation for the teachers’ pension plan, operating support to the public and separate schools increases by $198 million, or, if you wish, Mr. Chairman, 3.4 per cent, to $6.1 billion.

What does this budget provide for school boards? Well, let me tell you, Mr. Chairman. It finishes the funding commitment for the 2011-2012 school year, provides 4.54 per cent for the base instruction and class-size grants for the remaining five months of this particular school year, and provides sustainable and predictable funding. Did you hear that? Sustainable and predictable funding.

It provides grant rate increases of 1 per cent, 2 per cent, and 2 per cent for the base instruction and class size grants over the next three years. Most other grant areas will see a 2 per cent increase. It addresses enrolment growth and cost-of-living increases. Enrolment is expected to increase by approximately 1.5 per cent, or about 8,300 new students, plus we expect a 10 per cent increase in the number of students that will require English as a second language programs, a 3 per cent increase in FMNI population, and an 8 per cent increase in early childhood services, children with disabilities.

Also, Mr. Chairman, it introduces a new inclusive education grant that provides $68 million, an increase in funding. This is the first step in implementing a new funding model that supports inclusive practices in schools across Alberta, and it ensures that boards have the flexibility to support the unique needs of every learner in their classrooms. Funding will be used to provide the supports and services that parents and teachers identify as most beneficial to students, including instructional supports and assistive technologies. School boards will continue to have the flexibility to meet their local needs, including enhancing the availability of supports such as speech-language and physical and occupational therapies.

There is a new way of calculating and allocating funding based on many different factors. What’s important here, Mr. Chairman, is that this transitional year every board will see a funding increase. Going forward, we’ll see how this new model works and whether we need to make changes.

Supports for rural schools is a significant feature of this year’s budget. We upped our support through a couple of funding areas. The new equity of opportunity continues last fall’s $107 million funding addition by focusing on supporting equitable access for students. The new grant has three components, the first one being a per-student component of $156 for all boards; second, a component that addresses distance funding; the last, a component that helps remote communities.

Student transportation funding also increased, Mr. Chairman, by $14 million, and some of this was specifically to help rural communities. In addition to providing a 2 per cent grant rate increase for transportation, grants enhanced funding in other transportation areas. The fuel price contingency program, which provides funding whenever the diesel fuel price is above 60 cents, will continue. We’re expecting co-operative transportation funding to urban boards to encourage more efficient busing; in other words, fewer buses following each other through the neighbourhoods and shorter rides for children on buses.

We’re addressing declining rural populations, special transportation for students with disabilities, and interschool transportation so that students can be transported to other schools if courses are not being offered in the school of their neighbourhood. As mentioned in the 10-point plan for education, Mr. Chairman, we are conducting two transportation trials aimed at reducing bus ride times and enhancing the educational experience of students on a bus by making Wi-Fi available.

Other provincial initiatives that support students continue: $48 million for the student health initiative to increase student access to specialized support services such as speech-language pathology or audiologists; $232 million for the small class size initiative; $41 million for the Alberta initiative for school improvement grant to support local projects that help improve students’ learning. Funding was reduced in last year’s budget. This year’s grant remains at the reduced level plus a 2 per cent grant rate increase.

Funding for plant operations and maintenance of school buildings increases to $482 million, providing school boards with a 2 per cent grant increase.

As was previously mentioned, the government provided $327 million to the teacher’s pension plan, an increase of $27 million, or 9 per cent. This increase is attributable to more teachers in the system and higher teacher salaries. An additional $447 million will also be provided by Alberta Finance and Enterprise for service earned before 1992, which saves teachers approximately 3 per cent of their salary. In total, government support for the teachers’ pension plan reaches $774 million under Budget 2012.

Transparency and accountability are also very important. To increase transparency, we have posted detailed information about the performance and funding for school authorities.