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| ***Province*** | ***Législature*** | ***Session*** | ***Type de discours*** | ***Date du discours*** | ***Locuteur*** | ***Fonction du locuteur*** | ***Parti politique*** |
| Alberta | 28e  | 2e  | Remarques préliminaires à l’étude des crédits du ministère de l’Éducation | 8 avril 2014 | M. Jeff Johnson | Ministre de l’Éducation  | PC |

I'm very happy to be here and happy to present the ministry's 2014-2017 budget estimates and business plan. This budget reflects the government's commitment to supporting Alberta's families and communities through strategic investments in education. We're investing $7.4 billion to ensure Alberta kids continue to have access to leading-edge learning opportunities and that the best education system in Canada continues to be strengthened. We're putting more support in place to accommodate Alberta's booming student enrolments and changes in student demographics. We're ensuring the funds are there for priorities like small class sizes, inclusive education, and new school infrastructure, all of this to ensure our kids get the education that they need to be successful.

This year's budget reflects our commitment to a student-centred education system and to bringing Inspiring Education to life in our schools. We're continuing to prepare for growth and keeping with our building Alberta plan, and there are six programs in the budget.

Our voted estimates begin on page 53 of the estimates book. We have two primary funding streams that are important for you to note. The voted operational expense is supported by revenues from the general revenue fund. This accounts for a total of about $4.2 billion, or about 65 per cent of the total operating education budget. Education property taxes total about $2.1 billion. Approximately $1.9 billion of this amount resides in the Alberta school foundation fund. The remaining $204 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 54 and on page 59 of the estimates.

Now on to the estimates for 2014-15. A total of $649 million will be spent to support new construction and modernizations of Alberta schools in this year. Details of this spending can be found on page 59 of the estimates. As you can see, $12.2 million of the capital funding is statutory and will not be voted on as part of this budget. In addition, $377 million is allocated to the teachers' pension plan. This non-voted amount, or statutory expense, is outlined on page 54 of the estimates.

When you combine the $4.2 billion in voted estimates, the $2.1 billion in education property taxes, the $649 million in capital expenses, and the $377 million in support for teachers' pension - and there are additional dollars for teachers' pension that I'll speak to in a minute - that $377 million in statutory expenses, support for the K to 12 education system reaches $7.4 billion and will grow to $7.8 billion over the next three years.

The breakdown of the ministry's six programs begins on page 54 of the estimates. As we go through the following program breakdowns, you will know that the majority of expenses are in program 2. These expenses flow through the ministry to support the operations of school jurisdictions.

The first program in our budget, ministry support services, represents the corporate function of the department, including the minister's office, deputy minister's office, corporate services, information and program services, and communications. This program increases by .7 per cent, or $165,000, and that is due mostly to minor adjustments to supplies and services. In Budget 2013 we reduced our discretionary spending requirements such as travel, hosting, equipment purchases, consulting services, and conditional grants. In Budget 2014 the department will continue these strategies in restraining our administrative spending.

The second program is operating support for public and separate schools. The voted portion of this program is $3.9 billion. If you include the non-voted amount from education property taxes and the statutory obligation for the teachers' pension plan, operating support to public and separate schools grows by $201 million to $6.4 billion, a 3.2 per cent increase this year over last year.

What does this budget provide to school boards? Government's fiscal year spans over two school years. Part of the increase under Budget 2014 must go towards the last five months of the ' 13-14 school year. It provides for general student enrolment growth in September 2013. This budget also supports grant rate increases and student population growth for the 2014-15 school year, where enrolments are expected to grow by approximately 3 per cent. That's over 18,000 new students corning into the system.

With Budget 2014 government continues its commitment to inclusive education and the small class size initiative. Both programs will receive 2 per cent grant rate increases for the 2014- 15 school year, which brings the total support for inclusive education to over $402 million, thereby giving school boards the flexibility to meet the unique needs of all students.

Under the small class size initiative funding will increase by $17 million, or almost 7 per cent, 6.9 per cent. Total funding under the initiative will reach $265 million this year. We expect that school boards will continue to determine their own class sizes and direct our investment where it has the most impact in the classroom.

Albertans expect us to help every student to be successful. In Budget 2014 we are providing $45 million to provincial school authorities to help with programs and instructional supports to improve First Nations, Metis, and Inuit student achievement.

Also included in Budget 2014 is $61 million for the regional collaborative service delivery, or RCSD. This is an increase of $2 million, or 3.4 per cent, over the previous year. RCSD is a new model to support schools and community partners - it's not completely new money; it's a new model - in meeting the needs of children and youth as well as families who have children and youth with complex needs.

Maintaining healthy and safe learning environments for Alberta students and staff remains a government priority. In Budget 2014 we're investing $476 million in plant operations and maintenance for the day-to-day upkeep of the school. We're also providing $6 million in plant operation and maintenance, or POM, funding to private schools to recognize the cost associated with providing a healthy and safe learning environment for their students.

In Budget 2014 we have also included an increase of over 3 per cent to the equity of opportunity funding to ensure equitable access to education programs for all Alberta students. This brings total funding under this envelope to $113 million this year. This grant continues our commitment of the $107 million that was put back into the budget two years ago to ensure equitable access to educational programs for all students and recognizes the unique issues faced by rural school boards due to declining enrolment and distance challenges.

Under this budget we'll continue to support a safe transportation system for nearly 300,000 K to 12 students across Alberta. As in previous years I encourage boards to take an innovative and collaborative approach to transportation planning and consider how they can deliver these services most effectively.

As part of Budget 2014 we are also providing mitigation funding to eligible school boards. This one-time funding will ensure that no school board will get less funding than what was provided in the previous school year, using estimates from enrolment as of February 2014. Mitigation funding helps provide more certainty to school boards as they begin planning for the upcoming school year.

To the benefit of our students Alberta teachers continue to have some of the highest compensation levels in the country, and this includes a generous pension plan. Under Budget 2014 contributions made by the government of Alberta on behalf of teachers for current service increases by $20 million to $377 million. Government is also contributing an additional $455 million for the cost of the pre-1992 teachers' pension liability.

Boy, have I got a lot of notes here. But I'm sure we'll get to all of it. Maybe I'll skip to the end here if we have an end. There are a number of programs, obviously, to get through.

The good news is that all the enrolment is completely funded, 2 per cent increases on inclusion and class size. The maintenance and the capital dollars are the good news in this budget. They've increased. The dollars for modular classrooms have increased.

One of the challenges that we have is the fuel contingency. We were not able to put that back in the budget. We had to focus our dollars on the enrolment increases, which is driving a demand of about a $217 million increase to the operating budget of the Education department, which is about 3.3 per cent.

With that, I will thank you for the opportunity to open today, and I'm happy to take questions.