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| Manitoba | 38e | 3e | Discours relatif à l’Éducation | 3 mai 2005 | Peter Bjornson | Ministre de l’Éducation, de la Citoyenneté et de la Jeunesse | NDP |

Mr. Bjornson: Well, thank you for this opportunity. I take great pleasure in representing Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth as minister for the second time in this process. In many ways, what I say today will sound familiar to those of you who participated last year.

As a shared governance system, education functions best in a context of stability where long-term plans can be made. Local boards and schools must be able to make judicious decisions with a certainty that supports will be delivered by the Province. This government has tried to foster that stability and we are instituting some changes in 2005 that will enhance it.

On the other hand, as the senior partner in that governance system, we take seriously our responsibility to lead. Our 2005-2006 Estimates include new or redirected funds that begin to address areas of greatest need. In every case, those are choices. There are many more needs than any government could hope to address. We have identified the real priorities and directed the available resources towards them. I will provide some context to our budget and mention highlights that indicate how effectively education funding has been spent in the recent past and as budgeted for the coming year.

Education, Citizenship and Youth has responsibility for primary, elementary and secondary English and French education, enhancing citizenship and a youth portfolio. We work collaboratively with other departments in many areas, especially with Advanced Education and Training.

Our mission is, and I quote, "To provide access to relevant education that is of high quality, affordable, available and responsive." An educated citizenry and a skilled and adaptable workforce are key components of this government's economic development agenda.

On September 30, 2004, public schools served 186 668 pupils; 122 094 in kindergarten to Grade 8; 60 897 in Senior 1 to Senior 4; 2316 nursery pupils and 1361 pupils in ungraded programs. There were 13 127 pupils attending funded independent schools. Funding to independent schools is available for instruction and services special needs and curricular materials.

To meet our commitments in 2005-2006 fiscal year, which is different from the school year, $951.4 million will be provided to support school divisions and districts, independent schools, educational organizations, and the government's contribution to the Teachers' Retirement Allowance Fund; $898.8 is included to support schools and $52.6 million in capital grants for school divisions. In addition, $145.1 million is provided for public schools by funding raised through the education support levy.

The budget for 2005-2006 includes funding for an increase of $25 million for the 2005-2006 school year. This is an increase of 2.8 percent over 2004-2005 and brings the total increase since 1999 to $129.8 million. This government is meeting its commitment to increase education funding at or above the rate of economic growth in the province, the key strategy in our intention to provide stability in the education system.

The average per people support has increased 18.3 percent in six years compared to 2.3 percent in the five years prior to 1999. It demonstrates the value that we place on education and assures school divisions and schools that this government will do its part to address their increasing costs.

The elementary and secondary school system is supported primarily through two divisions of the department, School Programs and Bureau de l'éducation française, and their priorities are articulated in the kindergarten to Senior 4 agenda. We conducted a midterm review of that agenda last fall when it hosted three regional forums, and I am proud to say that, for the most part, the feedback was positive and the agenda continues to reflect the real priorities in Manitoba's schools.

Our budget for 2005-2006 continues to focus on those continuing priorities, including areas such as Aboriginal education with an increase of 0.7 million, students with special needs with an increase of 6.5 million, support for immigrant youth, including English as a second language, focus on literacy and numeracy, working effectively with parents, educational planning with targets learning outcomes and office accountability at a local level, technical vocational education, transition from K-to-S4 education to post-secondary education and work, and making the connection between research and the practices in our schools.

On the other hand, our midterm review allowed me to hear the re-emerging issues that Manitobans have concerns about. We have to address the problems of vulnerable youth, especially those related to socio-economic disparities. We have to address sustainable development as both the curricular focus and the management practice. We have to address rural education, especially where declining enrolment threatens the viability of schools. While the K-to-S4 education system remains the largest financial commitment in our budget, I am just as proud of what we have accomplished and intend to pursue in the areas of Citizenship and Youth.

Our Citizenship agenda is taking shape and we are just beginning to see how much can be achieved when we focus on such an important issue. Manitoba schools are responding with enthusiasm to our initial activities of 2004-2005, and our budget reflects our intention to take this further.

Coordinating provincial youth activities still feels like a new role for the department, but the reality is that we are well past the stage of integrating existing activities into the education system. Our department is providing the leadership across government to co-ordinate supports to youth and enhance the transition process from school to post-secondary education and work.

This co-ordination is being operationalized and is evident to the public through our recent move of three branches to two government departments to the street level location at 510 Selkirk Avenue. The location houses the Aboriginal Education Directorate now, which is a research and policy office focussed on implementing the government's Aboriginal Education Action Plan, Partners for Careers, Aboriginal programs' information centre, and employment and training services. The staff will deliver services from that location and work to engage community directly in the provision of those services.

As the location evolves, other government departments will deliver services and provide information on an itinerant basis. Thus, our 2005-2006 budget is directed to both continuing these emphases that Manitobans have come to depend on and establishing supports in areas where new priorities are emerging. Let me highlight just some of those areas.

The citizenship agenda: We are working on the creation of a teachers' institute at the Legislature that will give social studies teachers an immersion in the workings of parliamentary democracy. We are well into the introduction and implementation of our new social studies curriculum. We provide ten grants of $1,000 to schools to recognize innovations in citizenship education. We continue to support a community service credit option for secondary students, $500 post-secondary bursaries through Youth Serves Manitoba, and student exchanges.

We encourage youth participation in democracy through the MB4Youth Advisory Council and the annual youth town hall meetings with ministers. Once again, a very successful Youth Town Hall was held just recently, last Friday, in fact, in Brandon.

Education of Aboriginal students is another priority. We have a particular concern for Aboriginal students. While results have improved, their high school graduation rates continue to concern us. Our Action Plan for Aboriginal Education focuses on increasing high school graduation rates, increasing the number of Aboriginal teachers, and parental and community involvement in education, improving access to post-secondary education and training, and working to ensure a smooth transition to the labour market.

While there is a lot of work going on under this action plan, I particularly want to point out that one of the planned initiatives that I mentioned last year has come to fruition. We have signed a memorandum of understanding and begun work on the Making Education Work research project. This is a multi-year collaboration on effective Aboriginal education with the Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation. The Province of Manitoba is contributing $1 million towards implementation costs over five years, with the foundation contributing the remaining $2 million and all of the evaluation costs. As a province, we are implementing many best practices in Aboriginal education, but this project looks ahead to the next generation of best practice. As the project progresses, we will learn what more we can do to enhance educational outcomes for this important segment of our population.

Next, the Technical Vocational Education initiative: The Technical Vocational initiative is a $4.5-million joint project of my department and Manitoba Advanced Education and Training over three years. We are coming to the end of year one and have included funds in the '05-06 budget. The initiative will improve high school programming and upgrade technical vocational equipment in high schools. It will strengthen the links between high school, apprenticeship and college programs. It provides grants for demonstration projects to increase their number and variety.

This initiative will make technical vocational education more responsive to labour market needs, help prepare Manitobans for the highly skilled occupations that are so important to our economy, and improve Manitoba's economic growth and competitiveness over the long term. It will also encourage new teachers to enter this field and increase students' awareness of technical vocational career choices.

Supporting links among schools, families and communities, both the K-to-S4 agenda and the Aboriginal Education Action Plan include a commitment to improving the connections that schools have with families and their communities. In 2004-2005, we funded 38 demonstration projects across the province that engage Aboriginal parents and families in the educational life of their children. The 2005-2006 Funding of Schools program announcement included $750,000 for the first steps towards improved community and school collaboration.

The community-schools partnership initiative will support 15 schools to develop effective partnerships with families and community agencies, businesses and residents. The community-school partnerships will then develop local strategic plans for supporting families with children. In the longer run, we anticipate that this will result in schools being better prepared for children and children being better prepared for schools. This initial project is focussing on schools from the lowest socio-economic strata in our province because we have evidence that the school achievement gap is the greatest there. Last June, the Manitoba Centre for Health Policy published a report that showed just how strong the connection between socio-economic status and school achievement is. With our commitment to making policy that is connected to evidence, we knew that we had to make it a priority to encourage better practice in the neediest communities. Our commitment is to the success for all students.

My department co-ordinates over 200 government programs for youth, including Green Teams, CareerFocus, Youth NOW, Partners for Careers, STEP and the Young Entrepreneurs program.

We have entered the implementation phase of Future to Discover, a four-year Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation research project that will track 1000 students across the province from Senior Two to the first year after graduation. All operating costs are covered by the foundation. The project will enhance our knowledge about career development in the paths to post-secondary education for young Manitobans.

Assessment. Voluntary Grade 6 and Senior 1 standards tests have not served the purpose of providing a provincial picture of student performance. We worked this past year to develop an assessment approach that will have the greatest positive impact on student learning while being cost-effective and sustainable into the future. For 2005-2006, we will finalize and implement a renewed assessment approach in the middle years.

Tax Relief. Since this government was elected, we have been committed to prudent but steady reduction of the education support levy on residential property. That commitment continues into 2005-2006 with a further $30-million reduction, bringing the total reduction to $64 million. In addition, as recognition of the economic burden faced by farmers, in 2004-2005 we implemented new tax- relief measures reducing farm property taxes by 33 percent. This reduction will increase to 50 percent in 2005-2006. These measures combined with previous increases to the $400 Education Property Tax Credit, result in total property tax savings of $142 million since 1999.

Capital Funding. We also continued a major commitment to capital funding for schools. This is an area where we are bringing increased stability. This past February I announced the capital funding strategy for the next three years, with a commitment of $135 million over that time, or $45 million per year. This longer-term commitment has many benefits. It provides greater certainty for school divisions so they can engage in longer-term planning. It also allows school divisions and the department to be more strategic in their planning processes. It allows for more accurate cost estimates in tendering, better communications with parents and communities and opportunities to take advantage of potential efficiencies in purchasing.

The $45 million allocated for 2005-2006, includes $25.5 million for new schools, addition and renovation projects, and additional funding for nine previously approved major capital projects. It also includes $14.75 million for the infrastructure programs and over $4 million for the ACCESS and pre-designed classroom and portables programs. Since 2000, the government has provided more than $333 million in capital program funding for public schools. This is an increase of almost $161 million from the previous six-year period.

Members of the committee, those are my opening comments. I trust that you share my pride in what our province's education system has accomplished and its vision for the future.

Mr. Chairperson: We thank the minister for those comments.