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| Manitoba | 39e | 1ère | Discours relatif à l’Éducation | 9 octobre 2007 | Peter Bjornson | Ministre de l’Éducation, de la Citoyenneté et de la Jeunesse | NDP |

Yes, I do. Thank you, Madam Chairperson.

First of all, I'd like to take this opportunity to welcome the honourable Member for Springfield (Mr. Schuler) as my critic. I know that the honourable member brings with him experience in the capacity of a school trustee, and I'm very much looking forward to the dialogue that we'll have with respect to the education system in Manitoba and how we can work together to continue to improve what I firmly believe is one of the best education systems in the world.

I would also like to take licence and acknowledge that, in the gallery today, Dr. John Stapleton is here. He was the dean of the Faculty of Education when I was student president of the Faculty of Education. I'd like to welcome Dr. Stapleton here today to be a part of this democratic process.

I certainly appreciate this opportunity to put a few words on the record with respect to what we have achieved in the Department of Education, Citizenship and Youth in the past year. I appreciate, though, that there are only 32 hours remaining in the Estimates process, and there are a lot of good things we can talk about, but I'll try to highlight some of the things that we have been doing in the department.

I guess I could start with the bricks and mortar. We are currently in our second year of a three-year capital funding campaign that we had announced at $45 million per year, which is unprecedented, which has allowed for long-term planning, more favourable conditions for tendering and, essentially, has helped to speed up the process when it comes to establishing community needs, building new buildings and dealing with inventory that includes over 28 million square feet of buildings and facilities in the province of Manitoba.

We're very proud of the capital program and the work that we continue to do. I've had the opportunity to open up a school this past month alone in Churchill, and I look forward to other schools that we will be opening as a result of this campaign, including East Selkirk and the new school for the DSFM in South St. Vital, among others. The school capital is a very important part of this portfolio. Of course, how we fund education has been a very important part of this portfolio as well, with last year's announcement of $30.3 million or 3.3 percent for the '07-08 school year.

We currently fund 71 percent of the cost of public education, and we've been able to do so by increasing funding and taking considerable and meaningful steps to address issues of property tax for the purpose of funding education, including eliminating one of the property taxes that had been levied, the education support levy as had been levied by the Province, which is in excess of $100 million. We completed that and, of course, the property tax credit, having been increased from $275 to $525, for a total of $225 million, as well as the rebate on farmland, which is currently at 65 percent for '07. It's scheduled to increase to 80 percent over the next five years.

So the way we fund education is certainly a very important discussion in the public domain, but, for me as an educator, I think the most important thing is what we do with that money, how we invest in our students and in our schools. As I said, bricks and mortar are part of it, but to me, as an educator, it’s the magic that happens in our schools each and every day with many thousands of dedicated teachers and administrators and educational assistants and trustees and all the stakeholders, parents, of course, all the stakeholders who are crucial to the success of our public school system.

We continue to be innovative as a Province, leading the way on Education for Sustainable Development, for example, where we've developed an action plan emphasizing educated, professional learning opportunities and identifying Education for Sustainable Development focus, learning resources, integrating Education for Sustainable Development in the teaching of all subjects and supporting the United Nations' Decade of Education for Sustainable Development. The department, as such, has become the lead jurisdiction through the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada on this very important file respecting ESD.

Aboriginal education. Our department is also recognized as one of the lead jurisdictions with the Council of Ministers of Education in the Aboriginal education file. We're currently working with partners to increase the number of First Nations' educators. We're working to establish a closer working relationship with First Nations' schools and Indian and Northern Affairs Canada.

One of the other files I'm particularly pleased with is the focus on increasing student achievement in low-income communities in the north. We're providing pilot funding and programming support to 20 schools and low income and northern communities in support of community school initiatives that emphasize intersectoral partnerships and parental and community involvement, Madam Chairperson. The department has also entered into a memorandum of understanding with R.D. Parker Collegiate in Mystery Lake School Division in Thompson to work to significantly increase the graduation rate over a four-year period.

Having taught the middle years, another area that I'm really excited about is our assessment of student engagement in Grade 7, which has not been done before, but it's recognizing the need to assess how active our active learners can be with respect to understanding their level of engagement. We have, certainly, supported action-learning initiatives or hands-on learning initiatives or experiential-learning initiatives with funds allocated on a per capita basis for middle-years learners for experiential learning.

Of course, when I was first appointed in November of 2003, the department was changed to Education, Citizenship and Youth. Citizenship agenda is a very ambitious one that is pervasive throughout the new social studies curriculum as a core concept, and student engagement in the process of teaching and learning about what it means to be a citizen in a democratic, diverse, and sustainable society is the mandate for the Citizenship agenda. It's also providing support to the Speaker's office in support of the establishing of the Teacher Institute on Parliamentary Democracy, which I'm very much looking forward to next week.

Certainly, our commitment starts before public school and beyond public school as the Youth component to the portfolio, but we are assessing the students' abilities with the early development indicator prior to students attending school. We also have a number of programs under the Youth banner to address student needs post high school, in terms of transition from high school to the post-secondary education. So we also focus on career development, and we also focus on a number of different issues I could summarize quickly: Healthy Choices is part of the Healthy Kids Healthy Futures Task Force; rural education initiatives as we look at what are some of the challenges that are faced by rural communities; and student achievement as we look at effective assessment practices in general to address classroom-based teacher-led assessment, in particular. The department is also exploring ways to improve upon its annual release of our provincial report on student achievement, and a provincial report on school and school division priorities.

Also, recognizing the rapidly changing dynamic of the population of Manitoba, we have recently reviewed the English as an Additional Language strategy, and the department released an EAL action plan providing for additional and expanded programming and funding to support our newcomers, including the Intensive Newcomer Support grant that supports children from war-affected countries. As we just heard a MUPI on the situation in Sudan and Darfur, that is a very important part of the puzzle for newcomers who might arrive in Canada who have had unspeakable experiences, things that we can only imagine in terms of their experiences in their previous country of origin, and how we need to continue to find ways to support them in a meaningful way.

Of course, our commitment, also, in special needs with the regulations around appropriate educational programming in Bill 13, and that being introduced outlining the level of service that special-need students can and should expect. As well, their funding and support of special-need students continues to increase every year.

Technical vocational initiatives are very important as our economy is diversifying, and we recognize the need for more support for the trades and training in the province of Manitoba.

So these are many of the initiatives that we have undertaken, and we are currently looking at a number of other initiatives to support the needs of our students.

I would also like to take this opportunity to recognize the hard work of the staff of Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth who have been doing outstanding things in support of learning and teachers in the province of Manitoba.

With those comments, I thank you, Madam Chair.