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| Manitoba | 39e | 2e | Discours relatif à l’Éducation | 29 avril 2008 | Peter Bjornson | Ministre de l’Éducation, de la Citoyenneté et de la Jeunesse | NDP |

Hon. Peter Bjornson (Minister of Education, Citizenship and Youth): Yes, Mr. Acting Chair, thank you. I am absolutely delighted to be here today to talk with my colleague across the way about educational matters here in the province of Manitoba. I must say April has been rather an extraordinary month for me with respect to the celebrations that we've enjoyed in Education Week recognizing the achievements of Gordon Crook and Susan Gustafson, who are recognized as two of Canada's outstanding principals. I had an opportunity to have lunch with them and talk about the success that they enjoyed being recognized through the Learning Partnership as winners of this very prestigious award.

Of course, another luncheon with the Minister's Award for Teaching Excellence where four Manitoba teachers were honoured for their achievements as exemplary educators here in the province, as well as many other celebrations, whether it was MAST's celebration of the citizenship awards for the students from all six districts in the province and their contributions to making their communities a better place, or Manitoba Association for Multicultural Education's celebration of Educator of the Year, where they appropriately recognized students as the educators of the year for the work that they have done to promote peace education and to promote a multicultural fabric of our society in their own schools and in their own communities.

Manitoba, Education, Citizenship and Youth has recognized an increase in graduation rates from 1999 to 2007, from 73 percent to 82 percent. Our government has also invested $238 million into the K–12 public school system over the past nine years, a 31 percent increase since 1999, while the rate of economic growth had been 23.1 percent.

We have also followed through on our commitment to provide Manitobans with property tax relief by eliminating the residential education support levy and increasing the property tax credit, an increase of over 110 percent. As a result of the tax incentive grant this year, 20 school divisions chose not to raise taxes, and those that did had the tax increases offset significantly by the property tax credit increase of $75. In fact, only three school divisions out of 36 will see any increase in property taxes. What that amounts to in one school division, on a $125,000 home, it's one dollar. In another school division, on a $125,000 assessed home, it's two dollars. There's only one anomaly, and we will certainly be talking to that school division about why that was the case, that their taxes went up by $43.

We have increased, or pardon me, reduced taxes on the average $125,000 home by over 16 percent since we've been in office. We also invested $483 million into schools capital, more than double what was provided in the final eight years of the previous government. Our commitment to build, replace and renovate schools across the province has provided funding for 11 new schools, 12 replacement schools, 49 additional renovation projects. Once the 100-plus projects are completed this year, in the next capital year, that will have meant over 1,050 projects will have been completed through infrastructure improvements throughout the province of Manitoba.

Of course, it continues to be a very popular policy that school year would start after the Labour Day long weekend. We know that summer is short–it feels like it will be particularly short this year–so I know we'll all enjoy that extra Labour Day weekend with our families without having the start of the school year until after that time.

There have been a number of different issues that we've addressed, including funding increases to special needs by 49.2 percent since 1999 and, of course, that is a significant increase compared to 4.7 percent of the previous administration.

Manitoba teachers have seen our government respond to their pension requests. I know that I had been a teacher advocate that was quite concerned about the unfunded pension liability, and through the good work of my colleague the Minister of Finance (Mr. Selinger), we have secured $1.5 billion to the TRAF fund, 75 percent of the government's pension liability because the main account had been an issue of primary concern for the teachers of Manitoba. The stability of that account is no longer in question because of that significant increase–or, pardon me, contribution–to address that particular liability.

These are a few of the many things that we've been able to accomplish in the province of Manitoba for our education stakeholders.

We continue to work hard to ensure that our schools are safe communities. I was pleased to introduce the legislation that would deal with the issue of cyber-bullying, as unfortunately technology does not come with rules, so we have to be responsive to the technology and the fact that there are predators who will find a way to use that technology in a very inappropriate manner. We know that students are victims of cyber-bullying, of text-message bullying, of bullying on social networks, and we know that that's not acceptable nor tolerable in our schools. As such, we will be working with our partners to ensure that regulations are in place to deal with the technology that which, as I said, came without rules.

I was very pleased to attend the Safe Schools forum where we also recognized the three top video award winners from students who had generated videos that sent a very strong anti-bullying message. Over 2,400 students voted on the 10 videos that were short-listed after a submission of 160 different videos, and the students picked three very powerful messages that had been scripted, performed and filmed by students. A review-and-rate program allowed students to have very meaningful dialogue and learning moments with their teachers about the impacts of bullying in the classroom environment.

So, although we have certainly done a number of very innovative things and we continue to find ways to improve the system, whether it's through the bricks and mortar or whether it's from the magic that takes place every single day inside our classrooms, from the 15,000 dedicated teachers that we have working for us in the province of Manitoba, on behalf of the 185,000 students that attend our schools each and every day, we continue to work with our partners to ensure that our schools are safe, caring, learning environments and, more importantly, inclusive learning environments where all students have an opportunity to learn and all students are full participants in the education program in Manitoba.

With those few comments, I look forward to the discussion with my colleague. I know that he truly has the best interests of students at heart as a former trustee, and we've had many discussions around the education system and what it means to the economy and to the social well-being of our people here in Manitoba. I'm very much looking forward to the discussion with my critic, the Member for Springfield (Mr. Schuler).

With those few remarks, Mr. Acting Chairperson, I thank you for that opportunity.