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| Manitoba | 39e | 3e | Discours relatif à l’Éducation | 27 avril 2009 | Peter Bjornson | Ministre de l’Éducation, de la Citoyenneté et de la Jeunesse | NDP |

Hon. Peter Bjornson (Minister of Education, Citizenship and Youth): Yes, I do, Madam Chair.

I'm pleased to be here today to talk about our most recent encouraging developments in Manitoba's education system. Our education system is the cornerstone in improving the social and economic well-being of our citizens, and we are educating students for citizenship in a diverse, democratic and sustainable society. Moreover, the province's growing knowledge-based economy has led to an increasing demand for citizens that possess a broad scope of skills in all occupations. My department continues to play a key role in addressing the diverse educational, social, and economic needs of Manitoba students.

I would now like to review our department's recent activities and accomplishments intended to help Manitoba children and youth access relevant, engaging, high quality and responsive education that is inclusive of every learner's needs and leads to lifelong learning as active, responsible citizens.

I am pleased to tell you that Manitoba's high school graduation rate continues to trend upward. In June of 2008, the graduation rate was 79 percent, which is an increase of 2.4 percentage points from June '07 and a 5 percent increase over the last five years. MECY remains committed to funding programs and activities that help ensure that this positive trend continues into the future.

In spite of the current challenging economic times, funding to schools in the '09-10 school year will increase by $53.1 million, or 5.25 percent. With the '09-10 announcement, total provincial funding, including operating funding, teacher pension costs, property tax rebates and credits is projected to be 77.1 percent of the cost of public education for '09-10.

Madam Chair, over the past 10 years, our government has invested an additional $292 million in the K-12 public school system. It's a 38 percent increase since '99, while the rate of economic growth has been approximately 24.2 percent.

We've also followed through on our commitment to provide Manitobans with property tax relief by eliminating the residential education support levy, increasing the property tax credit and introducing a farmland school tax rebate.

As a result of the tax incentive grant this year, most school divisions chose not to raise taxes, and those that did had the tax increases offset significantly by the property tax credit increase of $50.

We have reduced taxes on the average $125,000 home by over 24 percent since we've been in office, and according to Statistics Canada, Manitoba is the only province that has seen property taxes decrease from 2000 to 2008.

In response to declining enrolments in our '09-10 announcement, the Province is introducing a new additional instructional support grant for small schools to assist divisions with the cost of sustaining small schools. The $800,000 allocation will ensure that each qualifying school receives at least $125,000 through the funding formula.

As well, Madam Chair, the announcement included $33.2 million more for equalization to support school divisions, particularly those with a low tax base, $2.6 million to ensure that all school divisions see at least a 2 percent increase in funding from '08-09, as well as $1.1 million more for small schools in addition to the new additional instructional support for small schools grant that I just mentioned.

The community schools grant was increased by $195,000 and will support three new community schools this year. Community schools enrich students' education by working with parents and families to help more students become successful and stay in school.

Funding for another initiative, the grade 11 and 12 physical education-health education, is increasing by $1.6 million over last year's total of $2.1 million, and this funding increase supports implementation of the new physical education-health education requirements.

As you may recall, these changes were recommended as a high priority by the all-party Healthy Kids, Healthy Futures task force.

While Manitoba's education system is far more than bricks and mortar, the importance of maintaining strong school infrastructure to support Manitoba's growing population cannot go unacknowledged. A record public schools capital investment of $310 million over four years will see construction of new schools, along with over 400 revitalization projects.

Madam Chair, new middle schools will be built in La Broquerie, Steinbach and Winkler, and new high schools will be built in Steinbach and Winkler. These new, revitalized schools will ensure that their increasing numbers of students have access to the best possible learning environments.

In addition to funding and infrastructure that has been provided, this government remains committed to growing many other initiatives in our children's education, so that our province can continue to build a strong and stable future.

My department will continue to work with Manitobans to ensure that our schools serve their communities in a variety of ways from shared space for child-care centres and libraries to venues for recreation and sporting events outside of school hours.

Madam Chair, we are also very focussed on the implementation of initiatives that improve the academic achievement of less successful learners, particularly Aboriginal learners and those in low-income communities.

In addition, we'll continue to ensure that the children of newcomers to our province will enjoy a welcoming and rewarding school experience that provides them a future in Manitoba. We will also continue to work on improving access to special services, supports and innovative learning opportunities in rural and northern schools, especially for students with learning disabilities.

This year, my department has also implemented an ECO-Globe Schools annual recognition program recognizing the commitment of Manitoba schools to Education for Sustainable Development, or ESD, and we will continue to develop and deliver other programs and services that facilitate the promotion and sharing of innovative ideas and ESD practices.

My department has and will continue to work hard to ensure that our schools are safe places in which to learn and teach, and, to that end, I'm pleased to report that a number of important pieces of legislation relating to safety in schools were passed in recent months.

The Public Schools Amendment Act, as it applies to cyber-bullying and the use of electronic devices, has been proclaimed and is now in effect. The legislation requires that schools include cyber-bullying as an unacceptable practice in their codes of conduct. It also expands the scope of electronic personal communication devices from which administrators can determine appropriate or inappropriate use in schools.

Two more points: The Public Schools Amendment Act respecting trans fats and nutrition was also passed. The bill requires that every school have a written food and nutrition policy and that foods prepared, sold and distributed in schools do not exceed prescribed artificial trans fat content levels.

In December of '08, a questionnaire was distributed to schools and school divisions to assess the current level of compliance with the legislation. Survey results indicate that most school divisions and schools are well on their way to compliance with the legislative requirements by the beginning of the next school year. Proclamation of this bill will likely take place some time in the fall of '09.

In closing, I'd like to say that my department still continues to work hard to keep improving our education system, whether it's through building and renewing physical infrastructure or developing and delivering innovative programming that increases the likelihood of success of all students. Continually improving public education remains one of our government's top priorities. Education is truly the great equalizer in our society and one of the best investments that we can make, a major long-term contributor to the quality of our future society and the productivity of the work force.

So, with those few comments, I certainly look forward to discussion on these points or any others related to education and its capacity to positively impact the social and economic well-being of Manitoba's citizens. Thank you, Madam Chair.