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| Saskatchewan | 27e | 4e | Discours sur l’éducation | 30 mars 2015 | Don Morgan | Minister of Education | Saskatchewan Party |

Thank you, Mr. Chair. I am joined today by a number of officials from the ministry. I have with me, on my right, Julie MacRae who is just starting her fifth week as deputy minister, so any problems that are there are solely her fault. On my left is Greg Miller who has gone from assistant deputy minister to acting deputy minister to associate deputy minister all within about a three-week period, so I congratulate him on his rapid transition through the ranks. And he’s one of the stalwarts within the ministry and has done a superb job, and I look forward to continue working with him.

Seated behind me is Donna Johnson, assistant deputy minister; Clint Repski, assistant deputy minister; Rob Spelliscy, executive director, corporate services; Angela Chobanik who is known as the guru of formulas, executive director, education funding; Brett Waytuck, executive director, student achievement and supports — he’s also new in that position so I’m hoping there’s tough questions for him — Kevin Gabel, executive director of programs; Gerry Kraswell, executive director, information management and support; Trevor Smith, director, information management and support; Lynn Allan, a person with incredible skill with slide decks who is executive director, early years; Brenda Dougherty, director of early years; Sheldon Ramstead or Sheldon Bumstead as he likes to be called, executive director, infrastructure; Yvonne Anderson, director, infrastructure; Tim Caleval, executive director, priority action team; Trish Livingstone, director, business improvement; Doug Volk, executive director, Teachers’ Superannuation Commission; Don Wincherauk, corporate projects group; and Drew Dwernychuk, chief of staff.

As you all know, this year’s budget was about keeping Saskatchewan strong and maintaining a balanced budget while continuing to secure a better quality of life for all Saskatchewan people. As a government, even when faced with challenging fiscal circumstances, it is our responsibility to ensure that the education system is well supported and that students continue to be a priority. That is why this year’s budget controls spending while maintaining important investments in our people and infrastructure, which for education means investments in our students and our schools.

These investments will also help us to reach the targets that have been set in the Saskatchewan plan for growth, targets we will work together as a sector as outlined in our education sector strategic plan or the ESSP. Along with the 28 school divisions, First Nations and Métis education organizations were engaged in the development of the ESSP to identify actions and targets to achieve the goals of the Saskatchewan plan for growth. We remain committed to these priorities. They have not changed.

In 2015-16, the ESSP continues to focus on grade 1 to 3 reading and improving outcomes for First Nations and Métis students. There are two teams leading these priorities. Liam Choo-Foo, director of education, Chinook School Division is heading the team working on the reading priority. Don Rempel, director of education, North East School Division is currently heading the team looking at improving First Nations and Métis student outcomes.

We are also working to ensure that 80 per cent of students are at or above grade level in reading, writing, and math. We are building partnerships with our First Nations and Métis population to improve graduation rates for those students, both to reduce the disparity rates in graduation for these students but also to better support their success. And we are working to see that 85 per cent of our students graduate. Reaching these goals will help us to ensure that every student has the support they need to take advantage of the opportunities available to them in our growing province.

To do this as a government, in addition to investing in education, it also means in every decision that we make, asking ourselves, does this put the student first, and what difference will this make for the student? Simply put, it means continuing to ensure students are a priority. That is why this year’s budget continues to make students a priority by investing in pre-K to 12 [pre-kindergarten to grade 12] education, the early years, libraries, literacy, and community-based organizations.

I’d like to talk briefly about our operating funding. This budget does provide for increased operating funding for school divisions. While tax increases were on the table, this budget contains no increase to the mill rates that were set previously for property tax. Overall funding for education has increased by 14 per cent from 2014 to 2015. The overall operating funding for school divisions is 1.87 billion — that’s billion with a “b” — an increase of 2.9 per cent over last year, which includes a $52.8 million increase in operating funding for 2015-2016. This is in the context of the government fiscal year.

Government continues to maintain the balance of operating grant to education property tax at 65/35. We may in the future seek to rebalance back to around 60/40, but for now there is no change. We will also begin consultations in reviewing requirements for the collection of education property taxes centrally. In terms of the school divisions’ fiscal year, funding has been increased by $81.5 million or 4.5 per cent. This includes increased funding to cover the collective bargaining agreement.

This year’s budget once again continues transition funding for the school divisions that would’ve experienced decreases through the new model. When the new model rolled out, we had indicated this transition could take between two and four years. We also said the model would continue to be a work in progress. That is why we will be engaging in deep listening with school divisions in the coming months. The transition funding will not be at the levels they were in previous years, but we wanted to ensure as minimal impact to students and teachers in the classroom as possible. School divisions that had been seeing decreases through transition adjustments are no longer receiving this reduction, and the costs have been distributed evenly throughout the model.

I’d like to move on very briefly and talk about capital investment. This year’s budget also includes a commitment of $248.5 million in school capital funding. This was the largest budget day capital allocation ever. It is an increase of $152.3 million or more than 158 per cent over 2014-15. Included in the school capital funding this year is $157.5 million which includes both construction and technical costs to begin work on the 18 new schools, nine joint-use facilities in Warman, Martensville, Saskatoon, and Regina. These are areas that have experienced extraordinary growth over the past number of years, and this investment will help to meet the demands of that growth. These new schools are being designed with the community in mind, providing a community resource centre, gymnasium, daycare, and other multi-purpose rooms. Members of the community, students, teachers, and school division staff led the initial design process and continue to be involved at key points. Construction will begin this fall and the schools are scheduled to open in fall of 2017. These projects are well into the planning stage and on track to meet our target date.

All previously announced capital projects will also continue to move forward. This year’s budget includes $91 million to advance these projects, including $47.8 million, which represents a $3.6 million increase, to begin construction for Connaught Elementary in Regina, Sacred Heart in Regina, and St. Brieux, as well as funding to complete eight other projects started in previous years, including Langenburg, Gravelbourg, Hudson Bay, Martensville High School, Weyburn high school, Georges Vanier in Saskatoon, St. Matthew in Saskatoon, and Saskatoon Holy Cross High School.

There’s also a $31.6 million, a 32 per cent, or $7.6 million increase for school preventative and emergency maintenance. We know that this is a welcome investment for school divisions as it allows them to proactively address maintenance issues. It also provides greater autonomy to school divisions in addressing their priorities.

We’ve also included $10.6 million, which is a $3.7 million increase, for up to 31 new relocatable classrooms throughout the province.

Traditional school capital funding includes $12.9 million as a result of changes to the way we fund capital projects. Government will assume 100 per cent funding for major capital investments. This change was made at the request of school divisions and will take effect as of April 1, 2015. With this change, school divisions will no longer need to borrow for a local share of capital projects. This will mean less administrative work for school divisions and overall savings, at least $25 million over 20 years, for the education sector on interest costs.

While we continue to fund ongoing capital projects, no new projects are being approved for the design phase in this year. We recognize school divisions’ autonomy, and we will support them in using their existing reserves. This brings the government’s overall investment in school infrastructure since November 2007 to nearly $1 billion. The actual number is close to 948 million.

I want to talk briefly about early years. This budget also includes significant investments, more than $66 million, for early years programs to support some of the youngest and more vulnerable in our province. This includes a $2.14 million increase in our operating funding for ongoing costs of recently developed child care spaces. This also brings the number of licensed child care spaces in our province to more than 14,200, an increase of 4,935 or 53 per cent since 2007.

In addition we’ve also committed that a 90-space child care centre will be a part of each of the new joint-use schools. That’s a commitment of 810 additional child care spaces for these communities when these schools open in the fall of 2017.

The $66 million investment in the early years also includes a 1 per cent increase in CBO [community-based organization] funding, including child care centres to support the recruitment and retention of early childhood educators.

In addition to this funding, we’ve also provided $546,000 more to school divisions to support recently developed pre-K [pre-kindergarten] programs. These programs support the social, emotional, intellectual, language, and literacy development of 3- and 4-year-olds. Since 2007 we have more than doubled the number of pre-K programs in the province from 155 to 316. Our government is proud of the investments that we have made in this area.

I’d like to move on briefly and talk about libraries and literacy. We also remain committed to supporting and developing the literacy skills of all learners in our province and recognize the role that public libraries have in supporting that. In this budget, support for public libraries will remain at $11.09 million, and current funding for resource sharing grants will be maintained. This includes continued investments of $114,000 in the single integrated library system or SILS, $100,000 for the national network for equitable library service, $100,000 for interlibrary loans, and $2.4 million for CommunityNet for libraries. This funding will ensure that the people of Saskatchewan can continue to access information resources they need through the public libraries.

Support for literacy and literacy organizations will also be maintained at $2.45 million, which includes 815,000 for adult literacy, 537,000 for family literacy, 600,000 for summer literacy camps, and 500,000 for the Saskatchewan Community Literacy Fund. Included in these amounts is a 1 per cent lift in funding for family and adult literacy community-based organizations.

I’d like to talk briefly as well about the joint task force which includes ISSI [invitational shared services initiative], and I’ll come to that in a minute. As promised, our government also remains committed to continued investments to respond to the recommendations made by the joint task force for improving First Nations and Métis education and employment outcomes.

We know, as outlined by the JTF [joint task force] report, that a multi-year plan is required to systemically improve these outcomes for First Nations and Métis people. That is why last year our government increased the investment in this area from 3 million to $6 million, and the government budget will once again include $6 million to continue this important work, which I would like to talk about a little bit today.

A portion of this investment will be made through the Ministry of the Economy. This includes $550,000 in mobile career assessment units and transition services to support First Nations and Métis people to succeed in education, training, and securing employment. The Ministry of Advanced Education will also be investing $375,000 in partnership with SIIT [Saskatchewan Indian Institute of Technologies] for academic and career support for students.

Our ministry’s investment of nearly $5.1 million will support the ISSI, or invitational shared services initiative, which includes: $2.4 million for 16 projects, $1.6 million for Following Their Voices, $1 million for Help Me Tell My Story and Help Me Talk About Math, and $125,000 for Microsoft software licensing. These investments make a very real difference in the experience of the student. For example, the ISSI partnerships focus on supports for students in the areas of reading, literacy, graduation, early learning, as well as professional development for teachers.

The First Nations education organization determines which areas the dollars will be targeted toward, based upon the needs of their students in alignment with the priorities in the ESSP. Each partnership is uniquely designed to support students in that community. The partners determine how the program will be implemented. Some examples include access to a literacy coach, a graduation mentor coach, an educational psychologist, a speech-language pathologist, and a math consultant.

For instance the Good Spirit School Division partnered with the Yorkton Tribal Council. The ISSI agreement involves three schools, two on-reserve schools, and one provincial school. The partnership is breaking down barriers to help support students and build relationships between neighbouring schools, and now we’re seeing benefits from the student level right to the top level of the organizations.

Through their agreement, two positions were created and shared between all three schools. One is a literacy coach. The other is a community liaison worker. This person helps build personal relationships with students. If a child isn’t in school, the worker can help to understand why and problem solve. In some cases this could be finding out how to engage a student in school or it could be ensuring the student has what they need to get to school in the morning. The schools are also sharing academic work and professional development. Teachers from the provincial school are coming to the reserve school and vice versa.

As referenced earlier, the investment in Following Their Voices is another piece of this work which is also supporting one of the major priorities of the sector plan. The working group has begun research and development of a program that meets the needs of Saskatchewan First Nations and Métis students. They are using feedback from First Nations and Métis students and families as well as their teachers and school principal or vice-principal about what works well in order to be successful as a First Nations and Métis student in school.

This feedback is being shared with our First Nations and Métis elders and knowledge keepers to develop the initiative. An advisory committee and a working group are in place to do this work. It consists of First Nations and Métis elders, school division personnel, First Nations education personnel, university professors and researchers, education stakeholders, and ministry staff. Following Their Voices, we’ll use a model where in-school facilitators will work with the teachers in classrooms to meet the specific needs of these students.

This year’s investment will enable the group to expand this project to 10 to 15 schools in the province, further refine and develop professional learning and development resources for teachers and facilitators, and continued engagement with elders. These investments are vital to the success of these initiatives, and they are based on conversations and dialogue. The relationships being built with First Nations and Métis education organizations are immeasurably important to this work, just as they are to the sector plan.

I would like to talk about supporting students. I also want to talk about our government’s commitment to supporting students and teachers in the classroom. This year’s budget includes $4.6 million in funding to continue investments and supports for learning. This was an increase over the 2014-15 budget, and we will maintain the funding committed partway through last year. It also includes $420,000 for English as an additional language supports to deliver on the commitments made to school divisions in the 2014-15 school year.

Let me be clear that this is not a cut to EAL [English as an additional language] funding. In 2014-15 the government announced slightly more than $1 million which was directly allocated to school divisions for the school year. This allowed them to make decisions at a local level to determine and address the levels of support and resources required to meet English as an additional language needs in schools and classrooms.

The funding was paid out over two years of the government’s fiscal year since the government and school divisions’ fiscal years are different. That means that in 2014-15, $588,000 in new funding went to expand English as an additional language supports to support funding from September to March. Continued funding of $420,000 was included in this budget, which went to support school divisions from April to August. Also announced was an additional $75,000 in new funding to provide Braille and alternative format materials for students with disabilities.

Another thing I would like to highlight in this year’s budget is a $7,000 increase or $965,000 to cover the cost of transitioning to the teachers’ self-regulating professional body. This is to support moving away from the current process where the ministry is responsible for certifying teachers; and the Saskatchewan Teachers’ Federation and the League of Educational Administrators, Directors and Superintendents, or LEADS, are responsible for disciplining their members.

These changes will ensure consistency and transparency in the regulatory process. It will also provide teachers with the same authority and responsibility as other self-regulated professions in the province and enhance the integrity of the teaching profession. These changes are about maintaining public trust in the disciplinary process, protecting the integrity of the teaching profession, and improving the safety of our students.

Again, from the beginning the Ministry of Education has worked with STF [Saskatchewan Teachers’ Federation], LEADS, the Saskatchewan School Boards Association, and the Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations. We believe they have helped us develop a framework that will serve and protect the interests of our students, teachers, and the public. The interim board of directors with the assistance of the teacher regulation transition committee will finalize the board’s bylaws and prepare to begin operation in the fall of 2015.

This year’s budget also includes $379.9 million, an increase of $39.8 million or 11.7 per cent for teacher pension and benefits.

These are the highlights of this year’s budget. This concludes my opening remarks. We look forward to answering your questions.