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**Official Report
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(Hansard)**

Tuesday 19 June 2001

**Standing committee on
estimates**

Ministry of Education

**Journal
des débats
(Hansard)**

Mardi 19 juin 2001

**Comité permanent des
budgets des dépenses**

Ministère de l'Éducation

Chair: Gerard Kennedy
Clerk: Susan Sourial

Président : Gerard Kennedy
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LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF ONTARIO

ASSEMBLÉE LÉGISLATIVE DE L'ONTARIO

STANDING COMMITTEE ON
ESTIMATESCOMITÉ PERMANENT DES
BUDGETS DES DÉPENSES

Tuesday 19 June 2001

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The committee met at 1538 in room 228.

MINISTRY OF EDUCATION

The Vice-Chair (Mr Alvin Curling): May I call the standing committee on estimates to order. Welcome, Madam Minister.

Let me just set out the procedure, so that everyone can understand. I remember the last time we had a little bit of a mix-up here. The minister has 30 minutes for an opening statement, the official opposition also has 30 minutes for an opening statement and the third party has 30 minutes for an opening statement. This was the area we had some difficulty with last time. The government has the right of reply for 30 minutes. The minister or the government members of the committee may use that time in any way they wish. The remaining time is divided equally among the three parties in rotation at 20 minutes each, starting with the official opposition.

I'm going to call vote 1, item 1. How much time do we have on this? Seven point five hours?

Clerk Pro Tem (Ms Anne Stokes): Seven and a half.

The Vice-Chair: Seven and a half hours, Madam Minister. I want to welcome you and ask you to start with your opening statement, which is 30 minutes.

Hon Janet Ecker (Minister of Education, Government House Leader): Mr Chair and committee members, I welcome the opportunity to appear once again before the standing committee on estimates.

Last September, I provided committee members with an update on what the Ministry of Education had accomplished in our efforts to improve our publicly funded education system in the province. With another school year drawing to a close, I am pleased to bring you an update on all our activities.

But I think it's important to reaffirm, off the top, that our goal for education reform is the same today as it was when we were first elected in 1995. We remain committed to ensuring that Ontario's education system provides students with the best education in Canada and that we can equip our students with the skills they will need to succeed in a challenging world. Our focus on higher student achievement remains undiminished.

To meet our goals, we've laid out a comprehensive plan for education reform that's guided our steps since that 1995 election. Since then, we've been working our way through our commitments and doing what we said we would do.

We committed to fair and equitable funding for all students in Ontario's publicly funded schools, regardless of where they live. To fulfill that commitment, we introduced a new, student-focused approach to funding to protect classroom spending, reduce bureaucratic waste and guarantee our students that the resources for their education would not have to depend on whether they lived in a rich or a poor neighbourhood. This new funding approach replaced a complex system of 34 different kinds of grants with a more streamlined, transparent and equitable series of 11 grants.

One of the most significant of these changes is in the way we fund capital expenditures. I know that's something that has created confusion sometimes, but with our funding, boards know that funding will be based on long-term enrolment forecasts, so they can plan more effectively to meet their capital needs.

I'm pleased to note that by this fall, 246 new schools and additions, accommodating over 106,000 students, will have been constructed since the new funding approach was introduced in 1998. It's also interesting to note that since this change, there has been a 10% decline in the number of portables in our schools, another significant improvement.

In 1995, we also made a commitment to introduce a demanding new curriculum that focused on core subjects like math and science and provided our students with better preparation for post-secondary or workplace destinations. With the release last year of the new grades 11 and 12 curriculums, the government has completed the most comprehensive modernization and overhaul of the kindergarten to grade 12 curriculum that has ever taken place. This coming fall, the new grade 11 curriculum, with its innovative destination-based courses, will begin to be taught across Ontario, and the new grade 12 curriculum will be taught for the first time the following year.

In 1995, we committed to providing standardized province-wide student testing, so that parents could have clearer information about how well their children were learning and where they needed extra help. The Education Quality and Accountability Office's province-wide tests for grades 3, 6 and 9 and for grade 10 literacy testing are now a well-established part of our educational system.

Standardized tests give parents, students and educators vital information about where students are making progress and where improvement is needed. For example,

these tests have shown that our grade 3 students are struggling to meet the provincial standard for reading and writing, something we suspected but had not had the data to prove. That is why earlier this month I announced a new early reading strategy. Supported by \$24 million in new funding, it requires every elementary school to set targets to improve the reading achievement of junior kindergarten to grade 3 students, as measured by the province-wide grade 3 test, and to report annually to parents on the school's progress.

Principals, school councils and teachers will have key roles in setting targets and putting improvement plans into action. Teams of improvement specialists will assist selected schools that the ministry and boards have identified as needing extra help in order to improve. These teams will help the schools identify problem areas and help them develop plans to help their students succeed.

There's also evidence that our rigorous new curriculum and standardized testing program are paying off. In the fall last year, we received encouraging news with the results of the 1999 Third International Math and Science Study, called TIMSS, in which a sample of Ontario's grade 8 students participated. The results showed that Ontario students have significantly improved in math and science when compared with Ontario's 1995 results. In the coming months, we will also begin expanding student testing to other grades and other subjects. We will require that schools provide those who are falling behind with the extra support they need to catch up.

In the 1999 election, we laid out the next phase of our education reform plan. We did that in our campaign document entitled Blueprint. Some of the things included in there were to ensure that classroom funding continues to grow beyond enrolment; to establish a new province-wide code of conduct, which is designed to help create safe, more respectful learning environments for students to learn in and for teachers to teach in; new school council regulations to give parents the stronger voice they've asked for in their children's education; a comprehensive teacher testing program to ensure that all our teachers have and continue to improve their skills and knowledge to help our students achieve; and measures to ensure greater school board accountability.

There's certainly a great deal of work left to do. The ministry, though, has made progress, I believe, in each of these critical areas. I'd just like to briefly summarize some of the important steps, because I think they bear repeating.

First, to talk about funding, as part of our ongoing commitment to support the publicly funded education system, the province continues to increase its investment, to increase funding for our system. For the upcoming school year, funding for education has been boosted by more than \$360 million. And in response to what we heard from our education partners, this new funding is going out in a way that gives boards greater flexibility to address what they determine to be their local priorities.

I think it's important to get on the record that the province has indeed increased the amount of money it is

spending on public education. When we came to office in 1995, education spending was \$12.9 billion. With the additional \$360 million for the next school year, as I just mentioned, education spending will have increased to \$13.8 billion, a growth well above the growth of enrolment.

As well, I think it's important to recognize that we continue to improve and enhance funding each year to deal with priority areas. For example, this year, because of changes we made, boards with additional costs as a result of having remote and rural locations will see increased funding of \$37 million—and there were some 10 additional school boards that received remote and rural funding. As I came in today, I was just reading a press clipping that one of those particular boards is actually in surplus this year because of that. I think that is another important step that year by year we improve and enhance how we fund so that there is not only more money out there dollar for dollar but also more in priority areas

Of course, one of the key priority areas has been to ensure that more of that funding goes into the classroom and not into administration. I'm pleased to note that since 1997—this was when we changed our approach to funding—classroom spending has increased from 61% to 64% of a school board's total operating budget. We estimate that spending on school board administration has also declined by \$150 million since 1995. So not only do we have more dollars, but we have more dollars in the classroom—approximately \$800 million more overall in classroom priorities.

At the same time, we continue to focus resources on other priority areas, for example, special education. Last year, we increased spending by 12% over the previous year, and that was the third year in a row that resources in this area have been increased. For the upcoming school year, funding for special ed will increase again to a projected \$1.37 billion.

In addition, though—because while resources are very much part of it, they're not the only issue that needs to be addressed—as part of our ongoing plan with special education to improve quality and accountability, we created new standards for individual education plans for our special-needs students. This will help to ensure that boards are accountable for delivering high-quality programs and services and also that parents will know what services their child should be receiving. We've also provided and worked with our partners to develop standards for school boards' special education plans—the overall services they provide for special education.

We're now working on the development of quality standards for each exceptionality, if you will—for example, for children with autism—so each school board will know and be very clear on the kinds of services, the range of services, they need to provide to a child with autism to help support their education. As well, in this year's budget we announced an additional \$3 million this year and \$4 million in future years to expand education supports for children and youth in institutions and facilities.

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Another important initiative I mentioned was the code of conduct and our Safe Schools Act. We've already introduced significant measures to help make our schools safer, more respectful places that will support learning and teaching. Last spring we introduced the Ontario schools code of conduct, which sets out clear provincial standards of behaviour for everyone involved in our schools and, as well, outlines the consequences for students who are breaking those rules, who do not observe those rules.

We passed the Safe Schools Act last spring. That provides the legal authority to enforce the code of conduct. As with our other reforms, a phased-in approach is being used to recognize the linkages between the various elements of the safe schools initiative. Once different sections of the Safe Schools Act that set out mandatory expulsions come into effect for the next school year, principals, under this new authority, will have the authority to expel students from their schools for up to one year for serious infractions that are set out in the legislation. In addition, teachers will be able to issue one-day suspensions for a number of infractions. Since April, school and school board staff have been receiving training to support their new roles and responsibilities under this legislation.

Under the new expulsion of a pupil regulation, students who are fully expelled can earn their way back into a regular classroom by successfully completing a strict-discipline or equivalent program. We have seven demonstration projects that are now being put together for fully expelled students. They'll be up and running for this next school year. I think this is a very important improvement over previous circumstances where, if a student was expelled, the school board could quite literally wash their hands of that young person. What this requires is that if a young person wants to earn their way back into a classroom, a school board must be able to have the programming in place to help that young person not only continue their education but also deal with whatever issues may well have caused their behaviour. I should also point out that this initiative is accompanied by \$16 million in new funding to help support it.

Safety and protection of children in our schools is obviously an important priority. While the Safe Schools Act has made great progress on this front, I certainly recognize there is more we need to do to help our students make our schools safer places to learn in. We are currently in the process of implementing a number of key recommendations from Justice Sydney Robins's report on sexual abuse and misconduct in schools. He had a number of extensive and very careful recommendations which we have been working with our partners to put in place.

For example, last December we released a provincial model for local police-school board protocols, which directly addresses a number of his recommendations such as having appropriate procedures between school boards, police and children's aid societies for addressing sexual

abuse cases or when there is a suspicion that such activity is going on, and also clear procedures and rules on how and when students can be interviewed by police, and how and when parents will be contacted if there's an incident that involves their child that might well require police involvement—again, some important improvements not only for safety but also to make sure the rights of parents and all students are being observed appropriately.

I had a meeting with all our school board representatives to discuss the recommendations directed to them to make sure all of us, as partners, were working toward implementing them. Each board will be bringing their employment policies and practices in line with the recommendations. We've requested that they provide us with an update on their individual procedures and practices and how well they're doing on this so we can ensure we are indeed meeting the challenge.

I think it is important to note that we have also included age-appropriate training on sexual misconduct in the new curriculum for children, so they understand about setting personal boundaries and knowing when things are not appropriate. I am also pleased that the College of Teachers has responded well to the report and moved forward with a number of initiatives in their area. For example, based on Robins's recommendations, they've made some recommendations to the government about how to move forward with legislative and regulatory changes that would give them greater authority to deal appropriately with sexual misconduct by teachers and also to better define and broaden the definition of this behaviour, so we can prevent this happening to any child.

I think there's another important partner in our education system, and that is parents. Research has clearly shown that greater parental involvement in education not only supports improved student achievement but also encourages and then supports schools and school boards to be more directly accountable to parents. In 2000-01, we continued our support of parental involvement in the school system through an important new regulation that was based on what parents told us they wanted done. It strengthens their advisory role as parents on school councils and gives them more influence over their children's education.

Under this regulation, school councils have the right to make recommendations to their schools and school boards on any matter including, for example, but not limited to, the selection process for principals and vice-principals and the implementation of their local code of conduct safe schools policy. All school boards and principals will not only be required to seek the advice of parents on school councils but also, and equally important, to report back to parents about how this advice has been taken and what happened to it—again, one of the things many parents expressed frustration about.

In addition to giving school councils a stronger provincial voice, the government restructured the Ontario Parent Council which, as some of you may know, is an independent group that provides advice to the govern-

ment on issues of education policy as they pertain to parents. We've restructured the council so that school councils can now nominate and have regional representation on the council. This was something we did over the course of the winter at regional meetings where they selected their regional representatives to be on the council. That is now in place. They've had their beginning meetings, and I think they're going to be extremely helpful in their role.

The coming school year will see another significant initiative to support parental involvement. Starting in November, we will be launching annual surveys to measure parent satisfaction with the education system, with the education their child is receiving.

There's another important partner in our education system, and that has to do with our excellent teachers. I want to talk about another significant initiative which will help improve student achievement and help promote and support excellence in our teaching profession. It is probably a bit of a cliché, but I think it is worth repeating, that excellence in learning starts with excellence in teaching. Here in Ontario we have many excellent and dedicated teachers who have the skills, who have the knowledge and who go above and beyond for students on a regular basis, because they see that as just part of the job. They have the skills and the knowledge to help students achieve higher standards.

We also know there are other teachers who require assistance in doing so. We also know that parents have been very clear that they want to make sure teacher training and teacher learning is as consistent, as effective and as rigorous as it needs to be. We are responding to those concerns through implementing our comprehensive Ontario teacher testing program. In May last year, after extensive consultation and research, we laid out the policy framework and the implementation schedule for this initiative. The first component of the program was put in place last fall, and that dealt with a language proficiency test for teachers who were trained outside Ontario in a language other than English or French.

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Last week, I introduced the Stability and Excellence in Education Act to move forward with another piece of this legislation. If approved by the Legislature, the act would require teachers to participate in a recertification program. This proposed program would require all teachers to successfully complete certain courses and professional development activities over a five-year cycle throughout their careers in order to be recertified. This new approach to a rigorous, more high-quality system of professional development will help to ensure that all of our teachers stay up to date and have the skills and knowledge to help students achieve the higher standards we have set for them. I should say that the recommendation for recertification was something that was first put forward by the Royal Commission on Learning back in 1995, a report that had considerable support from all three parties in terms of the recommendations that it put forward.

The government's comprehensive program for ensuring teacher excellence will also encompass a number of

other initiatives. These include a qualifying test, much like a lawyer's bar exam, that will begin next spring. This will be a test that all graduating teachers will be taking before they step into a classroom to ensure that they have what they need from the faculties of education.

We'll also have an internship program to help new teachers develop good classroom management and teaching skills, through coaching and support from more experienced colleagues. Again, some boards have been very good at developing programs of this kind, but we want to make sure that every new teacher who steps into an Ontario classroom can have this kind of support at every board.

We'll also this fall be bringing forward a province-wide performance appraisal system that will ensure that both principals and school boards in their role as employers are evaluating all teachers in a consistent, fair and accurate way in the classroom across the province. That evaluation in the classroom is also a very important ability to ensure that we're meeting the needs of our students. The other thing about the performance appraisal and evaluation system is that it will also allow parents and students to have a voice in this process as well; again another significant improvement.

Other initiatives: recognition for teaching excellence. As we announced in the April 2001 throne speech, we will be encouraging school boards to reward high-performing teachers and principals. In addition, we are working with the college of teachers, the teachers' federation and the faculties of education to meet Ontario's growing demand for new teachers to be able to recruit the best candidates to our teaching profession here in Ontario. While we have been, when compared to other provinces, more successful in attracting teachers to Ontario, to our classrooms in this province, we know with the worldwide shortage that everyone is confronting we will need to be much more assertive about making sure that we can have good, excellent people standing in our classrooms.

One of the other initiatives I want to touch on is that for the upcoming school year we have committed to a number of additional initiatives to support our students, teachers and parents in this coming school year, and this has to do with the issue of extracurricular activities. In May of this year I announced a significant package of initiatives to help our boards take steps to help all of the partners to ensure that students have these opportunities available for them.

The package included additional resources that we put forward at that time, \$50 million in funding that school boards could use to address local priorities. It also would allow school boards to vary the average class size in high schools by up to one student so they could use those resources to improve access to teachers and help students, providing greater access to remedial help by expanding what is included in the definition of instructional time.

These initiatives were based on key recommendations from the advisory group on co-instructional activities.

After considerable consultation and work, they brought forward a number of recommendations to, for example, broaden the definition of instructional time to give school boards greater flexibility to recognize co-instructional activities when assigning teachers' workload. This is something that the legislation before the House this session proposes to do. They recommended developing province-wide standards for the training and orientation of community volunteers to help with co-instructional activities, work that we are doing with our educational partners. They've also recommended that we work with the college of teachers and the faculties of education to provide courses to prepare teachers for leadership roles in co-instructional activities; again, work that we have underway. They've also recommended that we withdraw the sections of the Education Accountability Act that would have required teachers to provide co-instructional activities, while at the same time proclaiming other sections of the act which would require school boards to develop and implement plans for the provision of co-instructional activities for high schools. This is something that is included in the legislation that is before the House this session.

If passed, the Stability and Excellence in Education Act would enable us to move forward with these commitments.

While I'm mentioning that act, there is another initiative that I think I'd like to mention, and that is that the act, if passed, will enable us make some important changes in the collective bargaining process. We recognize that if our students are to benefit from changes like the new curriculum they need to be able to learn in a more stable learning environment. Some of the annual rounds of collective agreements that we've seen in some boards have certainly been a concern to parents. While some boards and unions have been able to come to responsible agreements, other boards have had significant difficulty, both with teachers and school support staff. So both parents and students have expressed concerns about these disruptions.

In the legislation we propose two steps to help bring greater labour stability to our schools. The first includes adjustments to the collective bargaining process that would require the upcoming collective agreements negotiated between boards and teachers' unions to run for three years. This requirement will be phased in. As current contracts expire, school boards and teachers' unions will be negotiating contracts to expire on August 31, 2004. All subsequent collective agreements would have a term of three years. So it allows us to respect the collective bargaining process but at the same time lead to a little bit more stability in this area.

The other important change is that the legislation proposes to extend the mandate of the Education Relations Commission to advise when a student's school year is in jeopardy when the strike or the dispute involves school board support staff. Of course, that was something that they could not do. They could only advise us in disputes between school boards and teachers' unions.

Our achievements in education reform we believe have established a solid foundation for a school system that is focused on more accountability, more quality and improved student achievement. We intend to take further steps to build on this foundation, as we promised we would. By promoting higher standards, improved accountability, greater flexibility and choice, we will create a public education system that will continuously strive for excellence in student achievement.

The Vice-Chair: Thank you very much, Madam Minister. You seem to have made my job much easier. You had just about a minute to go.

The official opposition have 30 minutes in which to respond, starting now.

Mr Frank Mazzilli (London-Fanshawe): We've not used up our—

The Vice-Chair: I see. She's just made an opening statement. Do you want an opening statement to add to it?

Mr Mazzilli: My understanding was that we could use anything up to 30 minutes. So we have a minute left.

The Vice-Chair: Do you want me to ask for unanimous consent for you to use the minute?

Mr Mazzilli: Sure.

The Vice-Chair: Mr Mazzilli is asking for unanimous consent that with the one minute remaining he could make a final opening statement. Do we have agreement on that?

Mr Gerard Kennedy (Parkdale-High Park): Sure.

Mr Mazzilli: Minister, thank you very much for coming, and certainly after the hearings on Friday in London on tax credits this is an issue that obviously you're going to hear about from the opposition. I want to talk about it as a tax policy as opposed to an education policy, because there are many here who say this is somehow going to change education forever: \$50 million worth of tax credits this year. We don't hear from the Liberals that you can capital depreciate your Mercedes-Benz on your businesses and you can write off business lunches—

Mr Steve Peters (Elgin-Middlesex-London): Frank, why don't you ask about the Thames Valley school board?

Mr Mazzilli: But when it comes to a simple tax credit—

The Vice-Chair: Mr Mazzilli, I think the time is up. Mr Kennedy, you have 20 minutes.

1610

Mr Peters: Ask what's going on in your own riding.

The Vice-Chair: Could I have a little order, please.

Mr Kennedy: Madam Minister, I'd like to not just use this time up rhetorically, but with your permission, to get into some dialogue which I think would better serve the people of this province. I thank you for that co-operation.

I wonder if I could start off asking you, is there a single study that your ministry has done to show the impact of a private school tax credit on public education? Is there any study, any paper, any backgrounder that you can share with us today about that particular initiative?

Hon Mrs Ecker: The government has certainly received many submissions from different groups that had advocated on behalf of this particular kind of initiative. The government also was aware of the experience in jurisdictions other than Ontario. That feedback, both based on consultation and based on the experience in other jurisdictions, provided information for the government upon which to make this decision.

Mr Kennedy: With respect, does that mean no? You're the Minister of Education. There are at least submissions from some people in the province—probably less so before the initiative was proposed, but certainly since—that there is an impact on public education. I'm just wondering, as the chief person in charge of public education in this province, has there been some due diligence by your ministry? Have they looked at in any way or form—do they have a document—a research study or something that would demonstrate what impact the private school tax credit will have on your responsibility, which is all of the publicly funded schools in the province?

Hon Mrs Ecker: Certainly, the ministry had, as part of the response to the requests by many groups and parent groups to provide funding—this is not a new request, as you know. This is certainly something that groups and organizations had asked this government to do on more than one occasion. In response to those requests, ministry staff looked at the information that those groups provided to us and looked at the information based on what had happened in other jurisdictions across the country. So certainly that information was obtained. I don't know whether we want to get into a semantic argument about whether that's a formal research study or not, but certainly what happened in other jurisdictions and examining information that had been submitted to us is sort of a normal ministry practice. I would call that a due diligence thing that should be done.

Mr Kennedy: I'm wondering, then, could I apply a simple test to that? If it exists, could it be brought to us, the members of the committee who are charged with evaluating the dollars you're requesting and the activities of your ministry? If you've taken steps to protect the impact upon public education, if that due diligence has been done, can those reports and studies be brought forward to this committee as part of this process?

Hon Mrs Ecker: As I said, there are no formal research studies. But there is the information we received when we asked about what happens in other provinces, the information we received from other organizations that had submitted this to many members of this Legislature. I suspect some of that same information was submitted to your party as well, knowing the interest that your leader and some of your members had expressed from time to time on this issue.

Mr Kennedy: Minister, with all respect, you know how limited my time is. I've been trying to listen carefully to your response, but if there is no report, if there is nothing that you've independently done—you're the chief officer of education in this province for publicly

funded schools. If there is nothing that was done ahead of time—of course, all of us would like to believe this was a carefully planned initiative and you would be fully part of that process, you would have made your recommendations to cabinet based on some kind of evaluation.

But in the absence of your tabling that, I've heard your answer and I respectfully disagree. It would seem that there isn't a report. At least if there is one, it's a secret report because we can't have access to it. I want then to ask you if you could reconcile this—

Hon Mrs Ecker: The information is—

Mr Kennedy: Minister, with respect, I'd like to phrase this in the form of a direct question.

Hon Mrs Ecker: —is freely available in terms of information from the other jurisdictions about their experience.

Mr Kennedy: Minister, with all respect, it is startling and shocking that you wouldn't, in your responsibility, have done an analysis of the particular unique situation that 2.1 million kids in Ontario find themselves in, that you would rely instead of something from other jurisdictions, which you also aren't going to table here today because you have said repeatedly that it's just available. You're saying that nothing has been done by your ministry that spends \$14 billion reputedly—you repeat that—

Hon Mrs Ecker: It's \$13.8 billion.

Mr Kennedy: —over and over again. You say you spend that kind of money and yet you can't look at the impact of this particular initiative.

Hon Mrs Ecker: First of all—

Mr Kennedy: Madam Minister—

Hon Mrs Ecker: Mr Kennedy, you've asked a question. I would like to respond to that—

Mr Kennedy: I want to ask you to respect the time and respond directly to questions.

Hon Mrs Ecker: —because that is not an accurate assessment of what I said.

The Vice-Chair: Order. Let me just state this now. Mr Kennedy has 30 minutes. If he requests an answer without giving you a chance, that's up to him.

Mr Kennedy: Minister, if you think there's something unfair, I will withdraw rather than get into extraneous discussion. I tried to ascertain if any report was done and you've essentially said that there is not.

I'd like to move on to your comments. You said in your letter of January 13, 2000, that "extending funding to religious private schools would result in fragmentation of the education system in Ontario," and you said further "and undermine the goal of universal access to education." Your government, presumably with the assistance of your ministry, prepared a brief to the United Nations. Those statements are repeated in that brief relying upon evidence and research, conceivably at least, inputted from your ministry. So this is your research conclusion, at least as presented to the United Nations.

I want to know, if you've done no research to the contrary, can we still rely—does your statement of January 13 and all the research done—and I would caution you

ahead of time. The research that you submitted to the United Nations and the Supreme Court decision you quote say “partial,” “full”—potato, potato, it’s the same thing. So I want to ask you, you said and your government have said that funding of any kind would fragment and undermine public education. Can we rely on that considered, researched opinion of yours? Does it still stand today?

Hon Mrs Ecker: I think what is important to recognize is that we were responding to a United Nations request, rulings that they were making. They had asked Ontario a couple of questions about, for example, having no funding to a Catholic system and having full funding to schools. I certainly share a concern about providing full funding to independent schools in a way that other provinces have done it, where it’s sort of a grant, where the government is in the position of making judgment calls around different kinds of schools—religious schools, for example—that may or may not get grants. That’s something I don’t think is an appropriate step for a government to take, but since the government has agreed with many parents who have said that they do wish to have their parental choice respected and supported, the government’s conclusion is that the best way to do that—to respect that choice, to allow a parent the ability to judge what’s best for their children as opposed to the government doing that for them—is to go via a tax credit way.

So it is a little different—actually, significantly different, I would submit—than providing full funding or doing it as a sort of equitable basis, which was actually some of the requests that we had.

Mr Kennedy: You can divorce yourself from it if you like, and then at least we know that research isn’t acknowledged by you any longer. But the submission of your government said whether it’s partial or full funding, they relied, in fact, on Supreme Court Justice McLachlin, who said it doesn’t matter. You argued to the Supreme Court and the United Nations that this will be harmful to our public education system in whatever form it takes.

So I want to ask you this. You’re the chief officer of publicly funded education. There is an initiative by your government that is going to bring in private school tax credits. Is it your advice to the parents, students and teachers in this province that those private school tax credits will bring no harm whatsoever, in any fashion, to publicly funded education? Is that your advice to us today?

Hon Mrs Ecker: It’s not my advice; it’s my job to ensure that—

Mr Kennedy: No, Madam Minister, I think it’s fair to ask you your opinion.

Hon Mrs Ecker: Mr Kennedy, let me answer the question. That is not my advice; that is my job to ensure that doesn’t happen.

Mr Kennedy: Minister, I’m sorry, but I asked a specific question and I believe, in respect of 2.1 million kids, that it requires your specific answer.

Hon Mrs Ecker: And I gave you one.

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Mr Kennedy: I’m relying on you as the Minister of Education with statutory responsibilities for six or seven different acts, the only person in a position functionally to do something on behalf of publicly funded kids, and you, I think have an obligation—

Hon Mrs Ecker: Yes, I do.

Mr Kennedy: —to tell us your advice, your considered advice. There are no reports you care to share. There are no reports you care to make public that can assuage any concern of the public, so they rely instead on you, Minister. We know what your job is, but you are the minister. I want to know: is it your considered advice that publicly funded education will not be harmed by this private school tax credit? Can you give us that guarantee here and today?

Hon Mrs Ecker: Mr Kennedy, both our government and myself have been very, very clear that our priority has been and will continue to be our publicly funded education system—

Mr Kennedy: That’s not the same thing, with respect, Minister.

Hon Mrs Ecker: Well, let me finish—that our priority has been and will continue to be the publicly funded education system here in Ontario. It’s an important building block for not only our economic prosperity and making sure that all our students have what they need to succeed, but also for our quality of life in making sure that our students have the abilities and the knowledge that they need as good citizens. So our job and my job is to continue to put a priority on the publicly funded education system, and that is indeed what I have done and will continue to do.

Mr Kennedy: With very great respect, Minister, that is not the answer to the question. Because the people out there are wondering: if there is harm to publicly funded education, how much harm will there be?

Hon Mrs Ecker: There will not be harm, Mr Kennedy. I told you that.

Mr Kennedy: So you’re saying, you’re guaranteeing, it is your advice to us today, that this is not harmful to publicly funded education. This is what you in your capacity as minister can tell us today, that no harm will arise to publicly funded education as a result of private school tax credits; is that correct?

Hon Mrs Ecker: Mr Kennedy, one of the things that I do as an education minister, when I assume a job as minister of the crown, is take an oath. And I take that oath very, very seriously. My job is to do what we said we would do to continue to improve the public education system, to continue to have the priority, both myself as a minister and this government, on the publicly funded education system, and to ensure that nothing is interfering with our ability to do that. That remains my commitment.

Mr Kennedy: Minister, I don’t understand why you will not answer the question directly.

Hon Mrs Ecker: I believe I am answering the question.

Mr Kennedy: I asked you to answer directly. It is not the same to have a priority for public education and to say unequivocally that you believe, as the chief officer of education, that this will not harm publicly funded education. I've given you three opportunities to do that.

Hon Mrs Ecker: Why would a government that is made up of caucus members who are teachers themselves, have family members who are teachers in the public system, have children who are in the public system, why on God's green earth would they decide some night, "Let's do something to hurt public education"? I mean, Mr Kennedy, let's be serious here. Our commitment is clear. Our commitment remains. My commitment is clear and my job is very clear: to continue to improve the publicly funded education system for the students of this province, period, end of story.

Mr Kennedy: That's not period, end of story. You've let another minister create an initiative that most people in this province believe is a bad idea that harms publicly funded education and it doesn't just wash off. Why does your government do what it does is a question that I think many, many more people now are wringing their hands and shaking their head at, because it makes no sense, Minister. It's an ideological, shopworn idea that 33 US states threw away last year, and somehow you've permitted it to come into your jurisdiction right here.

Now, Minister, I want to ask you. One of the—

Hon Mrs Ecker: Well, it's doing a disservice to the many parents who not only support this but have asked this of both your party and ours and the NDP—

Mr Kennedy: Minister, you can see that neither the UN nor any of those parents—and I've asked them each time in committee, the finance committee that is considering this. I've asked them: "Do you agree with wide-open school tax credits for private schools, secular schools, for all those kinds of things?" The only place that's ever advocated it is the Fraser Institute and zealous advocates in the States that have been turned down any time people have been courageous enough to put it on the ballot or put it up for public debate.

Hon Mrs Ecker: You obviously haven't seen some of the parents who have been at those hearings, Mr Kennedy, or the many families and the many organizations who do support and have asked for that respect for parental choice. Your own party has talked about respecting parental choice—

Mr Kennedy: In the public system, Minister, make no mistake—

Hon Mrs Ecker: Just a second. Yes, I know, so on the one hand you trust parents here, but you don't trust parents there. I think that is really not doing a service to parents. You trust them here, but the Liberal Party doesn't trust them there. I don't think it's a fair approach to parents.

Mr Kennedy: With all respect, you are here to respond to the public interest as the Minister of Education. You've given us less than a sterling warranty that public education won't be affected. I want to ask you, very specifically—

Hon Mrs Ecker: Well, I think my word is worth something, Mr Kennedy.

Mr Kennedy: Minister, I want to ask you—

Hon Mrs Ecker: I know as a Liberal you may not agree with that, but on my side of the House that's worth something, Mr Kennedy.

Mr Kennedy: Well, you declined an unvarnished answer, Minister, and I wanted to put you in a position to do something about that—

The Vice-Chair: Order. Let's direct some of that discussion through the Chair.

Mr Kennedy: Minister, you have claimed here today and on at least six or eight different occasions in the House—and the Premier himself, on May 29, made the same assertion—that there are, in your words, here repeated today, \$360 million in new dollars going into education this year. This is an assertion you have made.

Hon Mrs Ecker: It's not an assertion; it's an actual—

Mr Kennedy: Minister, I'm going to ask you to have a little bit of control and let me produce a question that I'm sure you'll find fair and that you'll have an opportunity to respond to.

Hon Mrs Ecker: Well, inaccuracy does make me get a little interested in the debate, Mr Kennedy.

Mr Kennedy: I think you will find this is based on as accurate as your figures are capable of being. This is a document that you and the deputy may recognize. This is from your Web site, school board money projections, correct? This is produced by the ministry. On that Web site document, it refers to a line, and that line is called "Increased flexibility amount." I want to ask you a very simple, very straight and direct question. When you say \$360 million, are you referring to the increased flexibility amount? Is that what you mean?

Hon Mrs Ecker: School boards received money in two different ways. They received—

The Vice-Chair: Before you go on, could you tell us what document that is?

Mr Kennedy: The document is called School Board Funding Projections, 2001-02, Ministry of Education, Spring 2001.

Minister, with respect, because this time is precious, I really would like to ask you, that line, is that what you refer to as the \$360 million? When you talk about there being—

Hon Mrs Ecker: That's included in the \$360 million, because school boards receive money in several different ways, as you know. For example, one of the improvements we made this year was the remote and rural calculation. Obviously it tracks increased student enrolment. So there was indeed money that went according to those criteria, and the additional money—

Mr Kennedy: But, Minister, maybe I didn't state the question correctly, because—

Hon Mrs Ecker: Just a second. You asked for an answer and I'm giving you the answer.

Mr Kennedy: No, I asked for a yes or no answer. I don't want you to use the time otherwise.

Hon Mrs Ecker: There was an additional amount of money on top of that, a top-up, if you will, that goes out in the line called the "Flexibility grant." But all the new money that has gone to school boards this year, over \$360 million in new dollars, has gone to them as a flexible amount. So even though there is a flexible amount line that is there, that is on top of the other money that school boards are receiving this year, and all of that money they can use flexibly. We've been very clear. It's very accurate. It's in regulations. It's an audited process. So it's a very accurate reflection of what it is.

Mr Kennedy: Minister, with all respect, what your notes in this say is that that money is not additional money. It says very specifically—and I'll just refer people to page 2—"The amounts shown ... are not additional revenue available to school boards. Instead, the figures show the amount of revenue that boards can use with greater flexibility."

I want to ask you a question, because I think a very great deal depends on this. Last year you produced the same document. It's still available on your Web site and it looks like this. Last year, in this document, you included over \$200 million of phase-in payments made to the Toronto and Ottawa boards and to other boards. You included that in the regular operations. This year, you didn't include it; you made no mention of it.

Hon Mrs Ecker: That's because it's not there this year. We were very open in what we did with the phase-in payments—

Mr Kennedy: Minister, you are going to have to wait, because that's how this committee works. I will pose the question, and I just hope you'll let it be phrased so you have a chance to answer in a proper fashion. You say this year, and this year alone out of the last three years, the one-time phase-in payment, which according to the Toronto board you gave on March 31, 2000, doesn't count any more. I want you to consider carefully—

Hon Mrs Ecker: It's a one-time payment, Mr Kennedy.

Mr Kennedy: I want you to consider the answer to this. That payment was for the operating expenses of the boards that received it.

Hon Mrs Ecker: No.

Mr Kennedy: That payment was against the cuts that you made. It's the phase-in dollars that—the year before you said those phase-in dollars were counted. Right here, for the provincial total, you say "Phase-in funding" and there is an amount. Then suddenly this year, phase-in funding is zero for last year. The effect this has is to deflate the amount of spending last year by \$300 million, especially when it's included with what you call the supplementary heating amount. Those heating costs exist this year too.

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Minister, these are not audited figures by the Provincial Auditor. I want to ask you: will you agree today that we send these figures, your two different sets of figures—what appear to be a doctored set of figures, changed year to year—to the Provincial Auditor's office

while this committee is still sitting and ask for these to be stated in a fair manner? It basically understates spending by \$300 million and has the effect of misleading the public, because it creates the impression that more money is available this year than there really is. I want to ask you, rather than sit here and throw figures back and forth, will you agree that these figures go to the Provincial Auditor and that he look at them and be allowed to say which way they can be stated so they will agree? Will you make that agreement today?

Hon Mrs Ecker: First of all, the reason we report one-time funding as one-time funding is because it would be misleading and doctoring to report it as anything else. It was a one-time payment in 1999-2000 and it was reported that way. It was part of the overall mitigation monies that were available for several school boards that were asked to make significant restructuring activities. It was money that was to be given over a particular time period and to end at a particular time period, and it was designed for specific additional—

Mr Kennedy: Minister—

Hon Mrs Ecker: Mr Chair, this member has just accused this government of doctoring documents, misleading documents. I would like—

Mr Kennedy: And I have asked you a direct question, Minister. Your obfuscation in this committee—

Hon Mrs Ecker:—more courtesy to at least put an accurate answer on the record in light of these absolutely outrageous allegations. These are audited statements, Mr Chair. How dare he question the auditor.

Mr Kennedy: Minister, I want an answer rather than running the clock, which is what she's doing.

The Vice-Chair: May I have some order, please. Mr Kennedy, please.

Mr Kennedy: A very direct question was asked, and I would ask your assistance in obtaining an answer from the minister, because the minister is avoiding an answer.

Hon Mrs Ecker: No, I'm not, Mr Chair. We've put the answer out here. In 1999-2000—

Mr Kennedy: The Provincial Auditor is—

The Vice-Chair: Order.

Hon Mrs Ecker:—there was a one-time payment to the Toronto board.

The Vice-Chair: Order, Madam Minister.

Hon Mrs Ecker: It was reported publicly. It was one-time. It is not there now.

The Vice-Chair: Order.

Mrs Ecker: It is very clear. It is very public.

The Vice-Chair: May I have some order, please. If we don't, we may have to recess. Could we have some order, please.

Hon Mrs Ecker: Certainly, Mr Chair.

The Vice-Chair: I thought when I got the job as Vice-Chair, it was one of the easiest jobs. Don't make it difficult for me. Mr Kennedy has 30 minutes in which to do it any way he wants. If he doesn't want the answer and if he doesn't like your answer, that's up to him. But the outbursts—

Hon Mrs Ecker: But I don't think the public need inaccurate information.

Mr Kennedy: Minister, you will have 30 minutes at the end to say whatever it is that you like. You have agreed and I—

The Vice-Chair: Mr Kennedy—

Mr Kennedy: OK, I'm just trying to—

The Vice-Chair: Also, Mr Kennedy, your language is kind of bordering in a way that I may have to call you on it, but could we just proceed. I hear "misleading" and whatever you've been throwing around a bit. Could we just be calm?

Mr Kennedy: I'm very happy to be perfectly calm and to put it to the minister again. With all respect, Minister, I think it at least is a proposal that is non-threatening. If what you say has validity, it can be made valid by someone else looking at this. These books are not covered by the Provincial Auditor currently. You have used them for statements that the public relies upon. There has been a change in the bookkeeping. You've given some justification. You can give further justification in the 30 minutes that you have or any other time that you have through these committee hearings. But I'm asking you, would you, as minister, agree that an independent authority, the Provincial Auditor, look at this and provide to us his opinion about what is a fair statement of a comparison between the funding made, operationally and in capital, to the school boards and through the school boards in the last two years? I'm wondering if you would agree to that in order that we might have your full co-operation.

Hon Mrs Ecker: Mr Kennedy, as you well know, the public auditor is free, as an independent organization, to look at any particular ministry's spending. He does look at ministry spending on a regular basis, and these figures, these year-over-year numbers, we've put them out in a clear, transparent fashion. We could do what previous governments have done and add in other things to make funding look bigger, things that are not classroom spending. We could do that; we choose not to do that. This was very clearly part of mitigation money, one-time money that we said we would put out—

Mr Kennedy: Minister, I'm sorry, I'm going to interrupt because, again, you are misusing the time that I have.

Hon Mrs Ecker: —and it's done according to the accounting rules that the auditor puts forward.

Mr Kennedy: No, Minister, we have checked with the Provincial Auditor and this is not subject to—

Hon Mrs Ecker: I'd be quite happy to have individuals here from the officials who could go through this.

Mr Kennedy: OK, so you're happy to do that. So we will submit this to the auditor and he'll have your co-operation.

Hon Mrs Ecker: No, that's not what I said, Mr Kennedy. I said that we have staff here who are quite prepared to go through these numbers. These numbers are freely available for the auditor, as they always have been and will remain.

Mr Kennedy: Minister, I'm sorry, I'm going to proceed and take this to the Provincial Auditor. I'm sorry, and sad in a way, that you're afraid of his scrutiny in this regard.

Hon Mrs Ecker: Mr Kennedy, no one is afraid of the Provincial Auditor. We are a government that has actually had the Provincial Auditor look at many things

Mr Kennedy: Minister, I'm going to raise other questions—

Hon Mrs Ecker: We are a government that has actually had the Provincial Auditor look at many things.

Mr Kennedy: —and I'm going to ask for your more fulsome co-operation.

Hon Mrs Ecker: That is his job and everyone is fully co-operative with the Provincial Auditor and will continue to be so. So I think your allegation is inaccurate yet again.

Mr Kennedy: Minister, then I will ask you, with your multitude of staff resources, will you put on paper, will you reconcile for us then, will you show us some backup information any place that says you've increased funding by \$360 million? Is there any place that we could find \$360-million increases coming from this government? Because it's not in the estimate today, for example? Where is that to be found?

Hon Mrs Ecker: Mr Kennedy, if you've looked at the Web site, I'm surprised you haven't found it. We can have staff here go through the numbers for you. They'd be quite happy to do so. Mr Peter Gooch, who is one of the directors—

Mr Kennedy: Could we, for the purposes of this committee—

Hon Mrs Ecker: You don't want to hear it from the staff now? You've asked the question and now you don't want to hear it?

Mr Kennedy: No, Minister, here's what I would like and I'll restate it again.

Hon Mrs Ecker: He asked the question and doesn't want the information.

Mr Kennedy: As it travelled the distance across the bench something got lost in the translation. I'd ask you to direct your staff, or to request your staff, to provide in writing something on paper that shows that there is a \$360-million real increase in spending by school boards this year, as you said, new money by school boards this year as compared to last year. Would your staff provide that to the committee?

Hon Mrs Ecker: Certainly we can. It's publicly available information. We don't mind duplicating it for your research department.

Mr Kennedy: Minister, I want to move on and I want to ask you further about the estimates we have in front of us today. These are information requests, and if you wish to avoid them it will become, I guess, part of that particular track record.

Minister, you state in the estimates a certain amount of money. This is your share of money going to the school boards. We have produced a research document in the past showing that a significant amount of these dollars

has actually been dollars that don't bring new benefit. I want to ask you very specifically again, how much money that you purport to be giving out to school boards this year is actually the result of, for example, changes in property tax revenue, how much of it is restated capital?

One of the things is that people have to be able to compare apples and apples, and you changed the policy where you used to have capital funds and now you count that as operating.

Hon Mrs Ecker: No, that's not accurate.

Mr Kennedy: I would refer you to page 31 where you actually say—and your previous estimates have actually stated what I just said—but on page 31 it says \$189.9 million is capital debt servicing, and yet it shows up in the operating expenses of the ministry, and that's because of the change that you've made.

I'm wondering if you could tell us, if there is a succinct answer available today, or whether that is an answer that could be committed to writing and provided by your staff, how much of the total funding that is coming from your ministry this year is actually capital funds, that used to be stated as capital funds but are now included in operating? What would that amount be this year?

The Vice-Chair: You've got two more minutes of the time.

Hon Mrs Ecker: First of all, Mr Kennedy, we'd be quite happy to have staff answer that question, because as you well know if you've been through the briefings, the capital for new school construction, for example, school maintenance, all of that stuff comes under the grants that go out, for example, new pupil places—

Mr Kennedy: Minister, I'm going to interrupt you because again I've asked a question and if you're not going to answer the question—

Hon Mrs Ecker: We can have staff go through that in detail for you.

Mr Kennedy: I'm asking for the answer to the question. Can a figure be identified today that is the operating dollars that used to be registered as capital dollars, so we can have some better, fairer explanation? Is that available today? If it isn't, could we have it in writing?

Hon Mrs Ecker: Just a second, Mr Kennedy. The premise or your question is inaccurate. We'd be quite happy to have staff, either in writing or here today—

Mr Kennedy: Well, it's not—

Hon Mrs Ecker: Let me finish the answer, sir.

Mr Kennedy: Madam Minister, I'm just going to report—

Hon Mrs Ecker: You've asked a question. We would be quite happy, either in writing or with staff here, to go through in detail how the money is allocated to the boards—

Mr Kennedy: Minister, I don't need your condescension and I sure don't need your misinterpretation.

Hon Mrs Ecker: —for capital for operating, and now—

Mr Kennedy: Minister, I've asked the question very directly—

Hon Mrs Ecker: Mr Chair, I despair—

Mr Kennedy: I've asked the question very directly and the answer is either yes, you can, or no, you can't extend the courtesy to this committee. Will you provide—

Hon Mrs Ecker: I gave you an answer. You were so busy interrupting me. This is mad. I'm sorry, Gerard, but I gave you the answer.

Mr Kennedy: Your capital fund is \$50 million this year. What you've done is you've taken all the spending—it was \$900 million five years ago—and you've stuffed it into operating.

Hon Mrs Ecker: No, that's not accurate, Mr Kennedy.

Mr Kennedy: Now, Minister, you have an obligation when you show up here today to either know that figure or provide that figure.

Hon Mrs Ecker: I told you we were quite prepared—

Mr Kennedy: Minister, can I refer you to page 61?

Hon Mrs Ecker: Mr Kennedy, we were quite prepared to provide you detailed information, in writing or through staff here who are sitting here with briefing books ready to answer your questions. If you want to make a political point without the information, you can do that, but we are here. So to imply that somehow or other—

Mr Kennedy: Minister, you're still running out the clock.

Hon Mrs Ecker: —we are not prepared to give you an answer, again, with all due respect, is not accurate.

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Mr Kennedy: The other thing I want to ask you for is for the implication for property tax revenue changes. Over the last couple of years—last year's estimates make plain that every time property tax revenues go up, your share of funding of education goes down. In fact, every time you've so called cut property taxes, it looks as if you're increasing your share of education funding.

Minister, I'm going to ask you, and I'm not going to do anything but put the question because the public needs to know that part of the increased funding that you claim is actually money to pay for reductions in property taxes and none of it goes to the schools. I'm wondering—

Hon Mrs Ecker: No, that's not right. That's not right, Mr Chair. It's just wrong.

Mr Kennedy: Now, Minister, I've going to ask you—

The Vice-Chair: Time is up.

Hon Mrs Ecker: Mr Chair, with your indulgence, I would like to ask Peter Gooch to go through this for the committee, because I really think that this kind of mis-information should not go—

Mr Kennedy: Minister, can you use your time, if you believe in accuracy to—

The Vice-Chair: Order.

Hon Mrs Ecker: —unchallenged on the record.

Mr Kennedy: Let's see if it shows up in your time.

The Vice-Chair: I think we'll give you adequate time for the ADM to do that at another time.

It's now Mr Hampton's time for 30 minutes.

Mr Howard Hampton (Kenora-Rainy River): Minister, I want to take you back to your initial comments. You indicated that new school construction is based on long-term enrolment forecasts; is that correct?

Hon Mrs Ecker: Yes. One of the changes in the funding formula is to have longer-term plans and forecasting so that both the school boards and the ministry can meet communities' needs better. That's why we've been able to have more school construction.

Mr Hampton: Do you have those enrolment forecasts?

Hon Mrs Ecker: Yes.

Mr Hampton: Would you make those enrolment forecasts available to members of the committee?

Hon Mrs Ecker: Certainly.

Mr Hampton: Do you know what the enrolment increase or decrease has been over the last six years?

Hon Mrs Ecker: I'm sure the officials could have the answer in writing for you, or go through it verbally now, if you'd like.

Mr Hampton: I took a look at the information that we have available, and the indication is that enrolment has increased by 4.1%. Would you agree with that figure roughly?

Hon Mrs Ecker: I'm certainly prepared to have staff deal with it. They're just looking up the actual percentage figure.

Mr Hampton: I took your ministry documents and went through them. So there's been a 4.1% increase in enrolment. Has that 4.1% increase in enrolment been reflected in increases in the funding formula?

Hon Mrs Ecker: If you are comparing apples to apples, yes.

Mr Hampton: Could you tell me what you mean by "apples to apples"?

Hon Mrs Ecker: The funding formula is designed to respond to enrolment changes. So if we are comparing where we started with the funding formula, where we are in enrolment and where we are now, the amount in the formula is driven by enrolment data. That's one of the changes we've made.

Mr Hampton: So if there's an increase in enrolment, there should be an increase in the funding made available.

Hon Mrs Ecker: Yes. There are also other factors that we do—

Mr Hampton: I'm aware of those.

Hon Mrs Ecker:—above and beyond enrolment, but enrolment is one of the significant factors.

Mr Hampton: Would you agree that inflation should be taken into account when calculating education funding, as well?

Hon Mrs Ecker: As you know, Mr Hampton, there are many kinds of government funding that we do for many sectors that there are not inflation factors built into. Whether it's health, whether it's education, whether it's

any other funding that we do as a government, inflation factors are not a factor.

Mr Hampton: Does your ministry or does the government have records of inflation, or statistics which indicate an inflation factor for the public education system?

Hon Mrs Ecker: We don't track inflation as a factor. What we do recognize in the way we fund, we quite recognize there have been increases in certain costs, for example, fuel and heating costs. We had money last year, one-time funding for this last year. We had one-time funding again this year for money directed to that, to recognize those one-time costs. So while there's not an inflation factor built in, we do recognize the increases and decreases in certain costs.

Mr Hampton: Would you agree, though, that if we're going to continue to provide our children with the funding they require for education purposes, the funding formula would have to take account of inflation? Otherwise, for instance, if the inflation factor is, say, 2% or 2.5% a year and you don't take account of that, what that means then is you're in effect, year over year, starting to cut the amount that is available per student. You're actually starting to cut the amount of money that's available through the funding formula.

Would you agree with me, you have to take some account of inflation, otherwise the result is you're in effect cutting education funding?

Hon Mrs Ecker: One of the things we have always reported—and one of the things I've taken care to report—is actual dollar figures. The funding formula is designed to reflect increased costs in a number of areas. Whether the government should look at building in an actual inflation factor in future is certainly a recommendation that can be made, because we do look—every year we have changed how we fund, to improve it. As we get better data from boards and stuff, we will continue to do that. But there is no inflation factor per se in this or any other.

The other thing, too, is that the way money was being spent in the education system has also changed, so that there is more in the classroom than there was in administration before—for example, fewer school boards. The increase in classroom spending—the way we created the formula was to decrease administration and increase classroom. That indeed has happened even though, in addition, the money overall has increased as well, so not only more dollars but in classroom and over enrolment. We've always been very clear in terms of what we mean when we talk about the dollars.

Mr Hampton: The consumer price index for Ontario indicates that since 1995 there has been an overall inflation factor of 15%. That means that what cost \$100 in 1995 now costs \$115. If your funding formula has not kept pace with that inflation factor, in effect, in real dollars, students are receiving less funding today than they were in 1995. Would you agree with that?

Hon Mrs Ecker: No, I wouldn't necessarily agree with that.

Mr Hampton: Inflation is fairly widely understood, and what it means is if you're not accounting for inflation it means you are in fact cutting the budget. You've just told us there is no inflation factor in the funding formula, that you don't track inflation—

Hon Mrs Ecker: But we do track increased costs in areas, and that has been some of the work we're doing. For example, school boards simply didn't have the right data to track increases in transportation costs. That's some of the work we're doing, so we can better reflect some of their transportation costs. Again, I hasten to add that's not a criticism of boards by any stretch of the imagination. That's just the state of data that both the ministry and the board had. I don't think it's fair to automatically apply inflation factors that may or may not apply to certain categories of the funding formula.

Mr Hampton: When we talk with people at Statistics Canada, they tell us the StatsCan figure of 15% inflation factor since 1995 is probably greater for schools, because schools have these things—electricity costs, heating costs—and those numbers have risen faster than other statistics that are considered in the overall inflation figure. So they're saying a 15% inflation factor would be a minimum for the school system, and because of the big factor of heating and electricity costs, it's probably much more than that.

My point is, I heard you say earlier that you don't finance education with an inflation factor. If you're not financing education with an inflation factor in mind, doesn't that mean, in effect, you're cutting under the funding formula, because the dollars you're spending today aren't worth as much as the dollars that were invested in 1995? What's your response?

Hon Mrs Ecker: First of all, there is no general inflation factor, but we do observe or respect or fund increased costs. For example, we gave school boards additional monies last year for transportation costs that they had—

Mr Hampton: Minister, I accept that. My point is—

Hon Mrs Ecker: I said there is no general inflation factor, and I appreciate there may be a disagreement about whether that should or should not be there. But we have said very clearly that we talk about actual spending, actual dollars, and we will continue to do that in terms of the spending that's there. But again, in 1995 we said before we were elected that one of the important things was for school boards to find administrative efficiencies so we could have more money flowing to classrooms. Many of them have. For example, we've had school boards put together transportation consortia, if you will. They've pooled their busing and have had significant savings which they can invest. So—

Mr Hampton: The same boards will tell you that with the increases in the cost of diesel and gasoline, busing costs have gone up anyway. But my point is this: if you factor in the enrolment increase, which your ministry acknowledges is 4.1%, and if you factor in a 15% inflation factor and then simply apply the numbers in your funding formula—and we can get them from any

board—the reality is that in real dollars there is \$2.3 billion less in the public education system today than was the case in 1995.

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Hon Mrs Ecker: No, I wouldn't agree with that figure, because again it's comparing apples with oranges. For example, it starts with an inflated base. It also makes assumptions about inflation on certain costs that school boards would not necessarily be experiencing. We quite recognize that there are differences in costs. For example, around teacher compensation, the grants to school boards reflect that some boards have higher costs for teachers than other boards as older teachers retire at the top of the grid and younger teachers come in at a lower salary level. All those cost factors are recognized in the formula. I agree there is not a general inflation factor, but I would not agree with the figure you've put forward. I don't believe that's accurate.

Mr Hampton: Minister, the fact remains—and StatsCan establishes this for us—that there's been a 15% inflation factor since 1995 and a 4.1% enrolment growth. If you take those two factors and apply them to the funding formula, students in Ontario are receiving \$2.3 billion less in real dollars of education funding now as compared to 1995. All you have to do is do the multiplication.

Hon Mrs Ecker: Well, no. As I said, with all respect, the particular report you're referring to starts from a premise about where education spending was in the first place, because it has an inflated base that it starts from. I appreciate the point you're trying to make, but that is why one of the things we have done is to be very clear about how boards are funded, to be very transparent and talk about actual dollars spent and that they're more than enrolment and to be very clear about that.

Mr Hampton: Just to be clear, the figures are the figures your ministry provided to the standing committee on finance and economic affairs in February 2000. All the figures that were used were in fact provided by your ministry: the figures on enrolment growth and the figures on actual spending, actual investment in boards of education in the years in question.

But I want to turn to another issue. Minister, last year—

Hon Mrs Ecker: Mr Hampton, can I just say one thing? When you go back, it's possible to add in other expenditures by taxpayers, for example, for the teacher pension plan and many other things. You can add them into education if you wish. We have not done that, because I don't believe that's a fair way to do it. That's why, when we talk about the numbers we're putting out, we're talking about funding that is going to school boards for delivery of education in our schools.

Mr Hampton: I'm just telling you that the numbers that were used in this study are the very numbers that were provided by your Ministry of Education, and you took them before a committee of this Legislature. If you now want to say those numbers, as provided by your ministry, are inaccurate, then that will make an interesting subject for further research.

Hon Mrs Ecker: No, that's not what I said. What I said is that in the particular study you're referring to, what they have done is compare apples with oranges. We could have staff, at some point, walk through that if you'd like.

Mr Hampton: Minister, last year you argued, "We've been very clear that our goal is a good-quality public education, and the estimates of \$300 million needed to fund religious schools would be \$300 million that would come out of the public school system." Do you now disagree with your own statement?

Hon Mrs Ecker: We are not taking money out of the public education system. I would not support that. That is not the intention of the government.

Mr Hampton: At the time you were very clear that it would be money that would be coming out of the public education system. Have you now changed your opinion?

Hon Mrs Ecker: No, we are not taking money out of the public education system. I've been very consistent on that, because I don't think, as I said then and say now, that would be appropriate, that would be wrong. We need more money in the public education system, so any other initiatives will not be financed by taking money away from public education.

Mr Hampton: So the statement you made then was wrong?

Hon Mrs Ecker: No, I said I did not want to take money out of the public education system to finance independent schools, and indeed we are not going to do that.

Mr Hampton: It just seems to me that you were quite definitive then. You've been very clear that our goal is a good-quality public education system, and the estimates of \$300 million needed to fund religious schools would be \$300 million that would come out of the public school system. You're now saying it hasn't come out of the public school system. I'm saying that statement you made then must have been wrong.

Hon Mrs Ecker: No, we are not going to be taking money from the public education system to do, five years from now—sorry, five years from now is the total amount. We are not going to be taking money from the public education system to support parental choice with a tax credit. I would not support that; I don't think my caucus would support that.

Mr Hampton: People who look at these questions can decide whether you were wrong then and don't want to admit it. But I want to move on: would you agree that extending funding to private schools through a tax credit is a major shift in government policy?

Hon Mrs Ecker: It's certainly a difference in government policy. Whether or not it's a major shift, I think, would depend on the observer.

Mr Hampton: Since it is a major shift in government policy, would you agree that the government should provide some research, some analysis, to justify major shifts in government policy? Don't you think that would be a good idea?

Hon Mrs Ecker: We've been very clear that we've looked at the experience in other jurisdictions. This is something that is out for proposals for consideration for the Legislature. The finance minister has also been very clear that there will be further work done to decide some of the policies around the implementation, around the regulations of putting this in place.

Mr Hampton: Again, what's the specific research that supports this, as you say, major shift in government policy?

Hon Mrs Ecker: I didn't say it was a major shift, Mr Hampton. Those were your words.

Mr Hampton: I think you said it's certainly a shift. So it's certainly a shift.

Hon Mrs Ecker: I said it's a difference in government policy.

Mr Hampton: OK.

Hon Mrs Ecker: What the government did in proposing this budget initiative was look at what parents who supported this and had advocated for this had brought forward. As I said, that information is certainly something they had lobbied all of us—all parties—on; but, secondly, also the experience of other jurisdictions.

Mr Hampton: Could you tell us which other jurisdictions?

Hon Mrs Ecker: My understanding is that six other provinces fund independent schools in different ways, at different levels, in their particular jurisdictions. We'd be quite prepared to provide further information around that.

But I think there's something else that's very important here: the government, in making this proposal, is not a passive observer of how it is implemented. So one of the other commitments that accompanies this proposal is the commitment to continue to have the public education system as a priority, to continue to put new dollars into the public education system. I believe that is a very important commitment as well.

Mr Hampton: Minister, in 1984 the Conservative government, which I understand you were a staffer for at that time, commissioned a study on education called the Shapiro report. In the concluding chapter, Mr Shapiro said, "In considering what, if any, changes would be appropriate for Ontario at the present time, one cannot look to other jurisdictions and/or the available research results for easy guidance. With regard to other jurisdictions, their experience is always conditioned by their special social and cultural history. Therefore, extrapolation of Ontario, even from other Canadian provinces, can never be either simple or straightforward." This was a report commissioned by the then Conservative government saying, "You really ought to do some research in your own jurisdiction." So I ask you again, what research have you done in your own jurisdiction?

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Hon Mrs Ecker: I agree that other jurisdictions are very different from Ontario. That's why we're not doing it the way other jurisdictions are choosing to financially support independent schools. But we had many, many parents who came forward to this government who said

they felt this was an appropriate step for the government to take. The government agrees with that and so has put this forward as a proposal and is in the process of hearing and listening to how best to implement it.

Mr Hampton: You said earlier that your government does enrolment forecasts. Have you done studies of enrolment forecasts, should a number of parents take up the private school tax credit and move their children to private schools?

Hon Mrs Ecker: The enrolment forecasts are based on a number of things—population, demographics, economic circumstances—that go into that. But one of the other things we have been very clear about is that we are going to continue to fund the public education system above enrolment, because enrolment, while a factor, is not the only factor in how we should be putting money forward for our school boards. We've put in additional monies in a whole range of areas where we think our priority is above and beyond enrolment. I think we as a government need to continue to do that.

Mr Hampton: My question was very specific: since you do enrolment forecast studies, have you done an enrolment forecast study that looks at the impact of parents taking up the private school tax credit and moving their children to private schools?

Hon Mrs Ecker: No. What we looked at was the information that was brought forward from parents and groups advocating on their behalf and the experience in other jurisdictions.

Mr Hampton: You mean your government has introduced what you yourself call a difference in policy, what I would call a major shift in educational policy, and yet you did no study of the enrolment forecast or the enrolment impact on the public education system?

Hon Mrs Ecker: Again, Mr Hampton, the government has said very clearly that it is going to continue to make investments in the public education system, and we've also been very clear that it is not our intent nor our desire to have negative consequences happening with the public education system. So that must almost be a commitment that is observed when you judge what happens with the tax credit. Again, parents will be making choices.

But the other thing too, Mr Hampton, is that the goal with the public education system is to continue to take steps to make it better, to make it good, to make it a system that, why would parents wish to spend additional money to go somewhere else when their public school is giving their children a good-quality education? That continues to be our priority.

Mr Hampton: But you admitted earlier that your education funding formula doesn't factor in inflation, and inflation, on the Ontario consumer price index, has run at 15% or more over the last six years. So \$100 spent in 1995 is not even worth \$85 today in terms of the education funding formula.

Hon Mrs Ecker: Mr Hampton, as you well know, government expenditures, government funding under your government, under previous governments, under our

government, is not built on a general inflation factor, and neither are people's salaries or household budgets. We all, whether it's our household budget, whether it's an organization, whether it's a government, a ministry, a leader's office, have to set priorities. We all have to make sure the dollars we have are going to those priorities. Our government has made and continues to observe that commitment about increasing funding for public education, and we will continue to do that.

Mr Hampton: This is incredible. Your government doesn't look at inflation and the effect that would have on education funding—

Hon Mrs Ecker: No, that's not quite what I said, Mr Hampton.

Mr Hampton: —and you introduced a major private school tax credit without any analysis of what effect that would have on public school enrolment.

Hon Mrs Ecker: No, that's not—you asked if we had done enrolment projections based on that particular policy. I said no. But we had done work in terms of the information brought forward from groups advocating for parents and, secondly, the experience in other jurisdictions that had shown there was not an exodus of students who had gone from the public—

Mr Hampton: Would you share that information with the committee, please?

Hon Mrs Ecker: We've already covered this with Mr Kennedy, and those data can be made available.

Mr Hampton: I just want to be sure.

Hon Mrs Ecker: The finance minister has also used those data in the Legislature in answering your questions as well.

Mr Hampton: I just want to be clear. You haven't gone out there and actually done surveys or analyses to see what would be the impact on public school enrolment should parents start to take up the private school tax credit. You haven't done that analysis.

Hon Mrs Ecker: There has not been a specific study, but again, the government is not a passive observer in this, because one of the priorities here is to ensure that the public education system remains a funding and a policy priority for this government regardless of whether parents choose to educate their children in independent schools.

Mr Hampton: Lang Research is someone out there that does this kind of research and they actually commissioned a study this spring. They asked a large representative sample of parents in Ontario what they would do in terms of sending their children to public schools or private schools should a \$3,500-per-year tax credit become available for private schools. They indicated that 15% of parents would seriously consider taking their children out of public schools and sending them to private schools. Do you have anything to refute that figure?

Hon Mrs Ecker: I think, Mr Hampton, asking someone a virtual reality question, asking the parents if they would consider it and the parents saying they would consider it, is very different—

Mr Hampton: Would seriously consider it.

Hon Mrs Ecker: All right, seriously consider it—

Mr Hampton: In other words, they would think about it.

Hon Mrs Ecker: —is very different from whether parents actually take that step.

In addition, if the government were to sit back passively then you might be able to make your argument, but we will not do that. Our priority will remain the public education system. That is our major funding priority and we want to make sure that nothing is going to interfere with our ability to deliver on that particular commitment.

Mr Hampton: I just want to be clear. You don't have any studies that would tend to challenge or refute that research done by Lang Research which indicates that 15% of parents who have their children in the public school system would now seriously consider taking them into the private system should the tax credit become available.

Hon Mrs Ecker: I'm sure we can get into competing polls and opinion research.

Mr Hampton: I'm just asking you if you've got anything—anything.

Hon Mrs Ecker: We have not done a specific poll to refute Lang.

Mr Hampton: Minister, I've spent a lot of time talking with different boards of education. One of the boards I'm responsible for in terms of being in my constituency lost 200 students. They tell me that as a result of losing 200 students, their funding went down by \$1.4 million a year. They said that works out to roughly about \$7,000 per student. Another of the boards that I am close to indicated they lost 700 students and their funding went down by about \$4.6 million, again close to \$7,000 per student. Both of the directors of education said to me, "Look, this is how the funding formula works: If you lose, in general, 700 students, you will lose 700 times approximately \$7,000 per student; if you gain 700 students, you will have added to your education funding formula 700 by approximately \$7,000 and you'll gain \$4.6 million."

Minister, if Lang Research is right—and they're the only people out there who have done any survey work—and 15% of parents who now have their children in the public school system take your enticement, your incentive to move their children to a private school system, we understand that works out to about 330,000 students and to more than \$2 billion that would leave the publicly funded education system. Do you have something to refute those calculations?

Hon Mrs Ecker: First of all, some of those same boards you're talking about received money over and above their enrolment.

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Mr Hampton: They admit that.

Hon Mrs Ecker: All right, but if you're going to make the argument, you can't do it in isolation of government funding additional monies to boards above enrol-

ment. For example, the Rainy River board had a decrease in enrolment and had an increase in funding above that decrease. That is an important priority. So we are not proposing to allow—

Mr Hampton: They agree with you. They're saying it's \$7,000. You may factor it down to \$6,600, depending on special circumstances, and it may factor up \$7,200, depending on special circumstances, but if you're going to remove 333,000 students from the public education system, if you want to get a rough estimate, multiply by \$7,000 and it tells you how much money will leave the public education system.

You say you haven't done any studies to refute the 15% number. Do you have another formula you can give us to refute the \$2-billion number? Is there another formula you can give us? Because the boards we've talked to are very clear. Here's how the formula works: when you withdraw this many students, multiply by approximately \$7,000 and it will tell you what you lose; if you add this many students and multiply by approximately \$7,000 per student, this is what you gain. Do you have another formula you could present to the public which would refute those numbers?

The Vice-Chair: Madam Minister, you can take the 30 minutes response time which you have now and respond to all of those questions. You've got 30 minutes for response.

Hon Mrs Ecker: First of all, I'll answer Mr Hampton's question and then I think some of our officials might well wish to go through how the grant is calculated to answer some of Mr Kennedy's earlier questions.

Mr Hampton, you can use figures to play "what if." If you do this and if you do that—

Mr Hampton: I'm just asking you if you've got any more figures. If you have, I'd like to—

Hon Mrs Ecker: What I think is very important to recognize here is that we continue to fund our school system above enrolment, that we will continue do that. But the other thing that I think is important—

Mr Hampton: But not factoring in inflation.

Hon Mrs Ecker: I think it's also important that this was designed to reflect actual costs that school boards have, and that also is an important priority for this. So I don't think—

Mr Hampton: But you don't factor in inflation.

Hon Mrs Ecker: We do factor in increased costs. There is not a general inflation factor. I think that's a very different statement than what you were saying, Mr Hampton.

Mr Hampton: But if you're not factoring in inflation, it's not real dollars.

Hon Mrs Ecker: They are real dollars. I know in the NDP lexicon they may not be real dollars, but they are real dollars, year over year, actual spending, actual dollars, the same as it is for you and I in our household budgets or for anyone else.

Mr Hampton: But you don't recognize the cost of inflation so that can't be real dollars.

Hon Mrs Ecker: We will continue to be funding above and beyond enrolment growth. We will continue to have a formula that responds to increased costs.

Now, Mr Chair, I would like to have Mr Peter Gooch walk through some of the questions that have been posed about funding.

The Vice-Chair: Could you state your name and your title?

Hon Mrs Ecker: Sorry, this is Mr Drew Nameth.

Mr Drew Nameth: My name is Drew Nameth. I'm the director of the business services branch, Ministry of Education. I'd be happy to describe for you how the funding-per-pupil accommodation is calculated.

There are four components to the funding-per-pupil accommodation: a grant for school operation, which provides for the cost of heating, lighting, cleaning and general routine maintenance associated with the operation of the schools; a grant for school renewal, which provides for the repair and renovation of existing schools in the province; a grant for new pupil places, which provides for the construction of new school facilities, which may be new schools or additions to existing schools; and the fourth component is a grant to cover off the servicing costs associated with capital debt that had been incurred by boards prior to the introduction of the new funding model.

All boards in the province receive grants for school operation. They are allocated on a formula basis, a per pupil amount: the number of students in the board multiplied by a benchmark area requirement, which was determined by an expert panel established in 1997 to make recommendations on the funding model, multiplied by a supplementary school area factor which was introduced in late 1998 to reflect the fact that some schools have larger space than normal, so to speak. They have wide hallways, they were built with auditoria, a large number of shops, so that their area per pupil place is larger than the average. It is a factor to take that into account, an amount to reflect the median cost to heat, light and clean individual schools. The total grant for school operation in 2001-02 is estimated to be \$1.383 billion.

A grant for school renewal is also provided to every school board in the province. It also is allocated on a per pupil basis. It uses the same benchmark area requirement and supplementary area factor. There is a benchmark renewal amount provided per board. That amount varies from board to board reflecting the age distribution of the schools in the board. There's a proportion for schools that are under 20 years of age and an allocation to reflect the proportion over 20 years of age. The 20-year figure is a fairly well-recognized breakpoint in the life-cycle costing of school facilities.

The grant for new pupil places is not provided to every school board in the province but rather is provided generally only to school boards whose total elementary school enrolment exceeds the capacity of their elementary schools and/or whose secondary school enrolment in total exceeds the capacity of their secondary schools. The

capacity figures were determined on the basis of data submitted by school boards in 1998. They are determined on a consistent basis across the province based on recommendations made by a pupil accommodation review committee, which is a group of ministry and board people from across the province. These board staff have a number of portfolios, from business responsibilities, plant responsibilities and academic responsibilities, for both elementary and secondary schools.

For those boards whose enrolment exceeds capacity of their schools, the difference is calculated. That amount is multiplied by the benchmark area requirement per pupil and a benchmark construction cost per square foot which reflects the cost to design, build, furnish and equip new school facilities, amortized over a 25-year period. Since the model was introduced, this formula has been very successful, resulting in a large number of school facilities being built. By September 1 of this year, there will be 256 new school projects, new schools or additions to existing schools built, with space for over 106,000 pupils in new school facilities; very well received by the school boards, very well received by the financial community, which has provided the resources to the school boards to finance this construction. That financing would be paid by the school boards using their grants for new pupil places over a multi-year period.

The model also has built into it a very comprehensive accountability framework. The ministry is not involved in any way in the determination of which schools are built or when they are built. That's a board responsibility. The accountability framework, however, is put in place to ensure appropriate accountability for taxpayers' dollars. Boards are required to prepare at least once every five years a long-term capital plan where they would look at their accommodation needs, comparing current and projected enrolments with the capacity of their schools, to identify areas of need, develop strategies to address those needs and areas where there may be surplus school facilities, and to address and develop strategies to deal with those situations where there is surplus space.

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Other reports that boards are required to submit are standard traditional accountability framework reports: the dollars that are being spent on school renewal; which schools are benefiting; the types of projects that are being undertaken so that we can monitor what is happening in the system; detailed information on the new school construction projects that are undertaken in the province; the size of those projects; the cost of those schools; and the financing costs associated with those construction projects, so we can monitor the parameters we use in the funding model over time. We also ask for boards to provide to us detailed school condition reports, which are a building professional's assessment of the major repair requirements within each and every one of the 5,000 or so schools in the province.

This past fall, we also implemented a survey of school facilities which collects information from each of the five user groups within a school: the principal, teaching staff,

non-teaching staff, school councils representing parents, and the students on their perception of the cleanliness, condition, accessibility, comfort and security within each school. This information is compiled in a very detailed Web-based inventory system. School boards use that information to assess their situation with other schools across the province. To date we've been very successful in the implementation of this accountability framework and will be rolling out information over the next several months.

Hon Mrs Ecker: Thank you very much, Mr Nameth. I'd now like to ask Mr Gooch to deal with some of the other formula questions we were asked.

Mr Peter Gooch: The question concerns Mr Kennedy's observations about our projections of school board funding that were published in mid-May. Mr Kennedy referred to our multi-year picture that shows board expenditures in 1997 and our ongoing four-year—actually five-year—layout of the funding. The issue that Mr Kennedy asked was why we showed a certain significant payment made to school boards as one-time funding versus ongoing funding. The issue is how to compare on a reasonable basis, year over year, how much funding is available for public education in Ontario.

The first thing to observe is that we have to make a key distinction. In our public reporting, the projections we publish on our Web site and for school boards, the ministry tries to make a very consistent and clean distinction between funding that's provided to boards as part of the ongoing foundation or formulaic approach that student-focused funding represents and parts of the model that represent a multi-year commitment to school boards on the one hand and, on the other hand, funding that goes to boards for one-time initiatives.

We believe it is very important to make this distinction for two key reasons. The first is that we have an obligation to have full disclosure and a clear set of financial statements that the public can understand and, equally importantly, we have to provide information to school boards in a way that helps them develop multi-year plans. We don't want to show them funding that we know is going to be there for one year only as if it were there on an ongoing basis, or leave that impression. So we make a very real distinction between funding that's driven by the formulas in the model that represent multi-year commitments on an ongoing level of funding for the system and one-time funding.

Mr Kennedy: Mr Chair, if they're offering this, would they permit very straightforward questions in order to clarify the information they've provided or do they wish just to provide information at this time?

The Vice-Chair: I think he was responding to your question.

Mr Kennedy: Mr Gooch is responding to my question. I was just wondering, would the minister permit me to make very straightforward questions at this time or would they prefer to just present information?

Hon Mrs Ecker: I think it would be helpful if Mr Gooch could finish. I'm sure in the next round of ques-

tioning, if Mr Kennedy had further questions, Mr Gooch would be quite happy to stay and answer them.

The Vice-Chair: I think I hear a "no" in that one.

Mr Kennedy: I heard a "no" as well. Thank you, Mr Chair.

Mr Gooch: So the one-time funding that Mr Kennedy raised as an issue is approximately \$268 million, which is identified on our statement as a one-time phase-in payment, 2000. This payment was made to, I believe, five school boards in March 2000. It was made in recognition of the need for those school boards to have transitional funding to ease their transition to the new funding model. The bulk of the funding went to the Toronto school board. That payment was made, as I said, in March 2000.

As a technical matter, if we were going to show that as part of student focus funding, it would be shown in the 1999-2000 school year, and I would observe that if we did that, it would still show funding increasing between 1999-2000 and 2000-01.

The question was, can we show an amount of \$360 million in which school boards are having more money next year than this? The answer is yes. If you look at the spreadsheet that's there and published on the Web, you'll see that if we're looking at the ongoing funding, comparing apples to apples, if you look at 2000-01, you'll see that the ministry's estimate of how much boards will be eligible for in this current school year is about \$13.487 billion.

If you look at what we're projecting student focus funding will bring those school boards in the next school year, you will see that we're projecting a revenue to school boards of \$13.862 billion, and you will see that the difference is about \$375 million.

You might notice in our public records, we continue to refer to over \$360 million. That's as a matter of due caution and not to mislead the public. We're not certain what the amount will be in 2000-01, because that's a projection, and when we get boards' estimates in we'll have a more accurate number. But we are confident that that projection shows about \$375 million more.

The Vice-Chair: Thank you, Mr Gooch.

Hon Mrs Ecker: Thank you, Peter. I think some of my members may wish to address some questions in the final few minutes. How much time do we have, Mr Chair? Sorry.

The Vice-Chair: You have about 12 more minutes.

Hon Mrs Ecker: OK.

Mr Mazzilli: Minister, thank you very much. Certainly it's pretty obvious that we are committed to publicly funded education: \$13.8 billion this year with an increase of \$360 million. You'll hear all kinds of arguments, "Should you increase funding on one formula or another?" Certainly since 1995, if you take \$12.9 billion and \$13.8 billion today, whether you're to consider, inflation—I personally don't think that inflation is a good way to consider it, because in some ministries needs go down and in others they increase.

What about the years of 0% inflation? Did the Ministry of Education then give 0%? I certainly saw years

that were close to 1% inflation. I think if you look at the numbers and you spread it over the right inflationary time, then you probably have increased the budget in relation to inflation.

We keep hearing about—and it's been disturbing in my community—but I do want to thank you and your ministry for the increases to the Thames Valley School Board, \$18 million or so this year, a portion of that due to increased enrolment, some \$8 million and then another \$8 million as part of the \$360 million increase to publicly funded education. Let me say that's just the public board. There are also the separate school boards. So when you take the London and area, we have about \$1 billion, with those two school boards combined, to deliver publicly funded education.

I think we all need to keep this in perspective. When you take publicly funded education, being our elementary schools and secondary schools, \$13.8 billion—health care is only \$22.5 billion, so it's some three quarters of what it costs to deliver health care to all citizens in this province, and especially with the aging population. I think with funding, as it is in most areas, there are not any extra dollars to go around, but I certainly think it is a reasonable amount to educate some two million children in this province.

1730

It was interesting on Friday how the opposition was on about the tax credits for religious schools and how this is changing from some long-standing policy in Ontario. Let me tell you, Minister, I do support the tax credit, but I support publicly funded education. I have three kids, and they are in a publicly funded education system.

But let's keep it in perspective—a \$7,000 maximum tuition. Most of the \$7,000 maximum tuition would be religious schools, because most of the others would be well beyond that. If you look at just \$7,000, with three kids, that's \$21,000. With 10% credit this year, that would give me \$2,100 after paying \$21,000, if I were able to find a school. In five years, it may give me half, assuming I could find tuition for \$7,000 per child. In most cases, I would argue that you would be around \$30,000 if you were to find a private school and at best you would get \$10,000 in tax credits in five years.

So \$3,500—because up to a maximum \$7,000 tuition. We're talking tax policy here. This is not very difficult. So in net dollars for a person in my situation, if you had to find a \$10,000 school, it would cost you \$30,000 and you'd get \$10,000 back. How many kids do you think this is going to drive away from the system? We had Mr Hampton say that this is going to be 15% or 20%. I don't think so. It's certainly not going to lure me anywhere. I'm happy with the publicly funded education system.

We did have a lot of parents from religious schools who came on Friday, parents that pay \$6,000 per family in religious schools. Those parents will get 10% this year, or \$600 on \$6,000 tuition. Somehow this is the end of the world and a change in policy and it's going to drive students out of the system. I certainly do not buy into that. Tax credits, as you know, whether provincially or

federally, are in many different areas, and I've made this argument before.

Mr Peters, you were there when the parent came who sends his kids to religious schools for that choice. He drives a 1993 Buick, and he and his wife both work and drive their kids to school. Somehow we oppose that parent getting a \$600 tax credit—after paying education taxes already in his home—because he chooses to educate his children in some faith-based school.

There are tax credits for all kinds of things. Mr Hampton, I know, doesn't agree with business owners that capital depreciate their Mercedes Benz and expense their business lunches. I know Mr Hampton doesn't agree with that, because he's always fought for that. But you know what? For the Liberals, that's OK. Capital depreciating the Mercedes Benz, writing off your business lunches, going to golf tournaments for Liberals and getting a tax receipt—no problem. But if you go to a religious school, no way you're getting a tax credit. No way. I just don't buy into it. I support the long-standing policy in Ontario whereby publicly funded education is the way we should go.

When you look at some of the arguments that have been put out in the media, and just to keep it clear, this year it's \$15 million in tax credits compared to \$13.8 billion in the publicly funded system, some people have argued that if you take the \$300 million—and it's not this year; it's in five years—and you divvy it up amongst the public boards, it will solve all our problems. One part of the equation that they've all left out here is public boards. They haven't included separate boards in that. So the public boards have all divvied up this tax credit among themselves, not even considering that separate boards are part of the publicly funded system.

We heard in London many people before the committee who support the tax credit. I think it's a positive move for this government. But I know, Minister, there are other things that you've done this year. One of them is the Robins report, and I was involved in the debate. Although we do have many great teachers in this province, there have been a few that have used their position of authority to prey upon young children. Essentially, in that report, Judge Robins recommended that criminal background checks be done. These are not going to be foolproof. They're not going to be foolproof. There's always someone that can commit things after.

But the one thing that came out of that is Judge Robins thought it should be done at the entry level, where I argued that you made the right move in doing it over two years. To do it on a yearly basis, it would actually take you 30 years to go through the entire system and have an accurate accounting. So why not do it over two years and be done with it and then school boards have accurate information on that. Minister, can you just comment on the criminal background checks, when that's going to be done?

Hon Mrs Ecker: I think, as you say, criminal reference checks are one step. They are certainly not the entire answer. It was something that had been recom-

mended in varying degrees, that we take the step. That was something we committed to do in the last election. We said if elected, we would bring this forward. We are indeed doing that, phasing it in over two years. I think it's part of due diligence. Many school boards actually already do this kind of check anyway. New teachers, as they register with the college, have to submit a reference check. Many employees in many other sectors have to do a reference check. So it has become an unfortunate but necessary requirement for all of us in this day and age when we're dealing with children, but I think it's a due diligence step that would help.

Robins was also very clear that there are a number of other steps that need to be taken. The ministry and education partners are in the process of following those recommendations. We made changes. One of the things I was pleased to do in the social services ministry was to make changes in the Child and Family Services Act to better protect abused children, to have better reporting by professionals, including teachers. There has been training and work on that to try and provide better protection there. There have been changes in how teachers are educated, training for teachers and information for students in the curriculum about what appropriate personal boundaries and things are. We will also need changes in law which I hope we bring in this fall. The college of teachers has done some very good work in this area and, frankly, have actually gone further, I would suggest, than what Robins had recommended. One of their specific recommendations which I personally agree with is they've asked the government to pass a law to have reporting of incompetence to the college, which I think would be very much in the public interest.

Those are some of the initiatives that we're looking at to see if we can move forward in the fall to better protect our kids.

Mr Hampton: What about private schools?

Mr Mazzilli: Minister, when we're here in the fall—

Hon Mrs Ecker: Mr Hampton's question, just in case it gets on the record, we want to be very, very clear that certified teachers must comply with all of these kinds of rules wherever they are employed.

Mr Mazzilli: Very good for clarifying that. I certainly—

Mr Kennedy: On a point of order, Mr Chair: If the record—

Mr Mazzilli: Last fall—

The Vice-Chair: Mr Mazzilli, I have a point of order I have to deal with.

Mr Kennedy: I know we don't want to get into endless rounds of this, but private schools are not required to use certified teachers. I'm sure the minister didn't mean to imply that.

Hon Mrs Ecker: Mr Kennedy, I said exactly what I meant; I meant exactly what I said. It was an accurate statement, as he well knows.

Mr Kennedy: Not in the context.

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Mr Mazzilli: Minister, certainly last fall—

The Vice-Chair: You've got about a minute to wrap.

Mr Mazzilli: —I talked about my daughter doing grade 3 testing, and this was the year. Her class, her teacher, prepared them well and although she was doing it for the first time she felt the stress, as every child does, with the grade 3 testing. She came home after a number of days of testing and actually said it was easy. She was well prepared by her teacher, but I will say the curriculum is challenging, and challenging to the parents. Parents are expected to do a lot of work in the evening. I'm not there very much, but there is someone who fills that role, and we get through it.

What have you heard from parents on the curriculum? Are they working late into the evening to get through some of the homework?

Hon Mrs Ecker: The comprehensive overhaul of the curriculum from kindergarten to grade 12 has been a monumental task. It has required an awful lot of work by the literally hundreds of people—parents, teachers, other education experts—who were part of developing the new curriculum, and developing it based on a very important question: what do our students need when they leave high school at the end of their elementary and secondary education, whether it's post-secondary, college or university, whether it's directly into the workforce, whether it's into some other kind of apprenticeship or training program? What do they need to succeed in those destinations? We sort of worked back from there. So it is a more—

The Vice-Chair: I have to stop you now, Madam Minister. The time is up.

We've reached the point of a 20-minute rotation, and the first rotation goes with the official opposition.

Mr Kennedy: Madam Minister, I wonder if I can ask you about something you said to us. You said, on the one hand, when asked about your statement last year—you made a statement to the press—that the funding for private schools would come from public schools. You said that at one time. It was reported in the Toronto Star. You also, in your letter to Mr Axworthy concerning the United Nations, talked about the fragmentation and so on. When I asked you about the difference you said that you were referring, and if it isn't for both statements it seemed that you said the same thing to Mr Hampton, that the direct funding would be harmful—I have it written down and we'll see what the Hansard says—and that the indirect funding by implication would not be.

Yet somehow you're telling us that the only studies that you've done are looking at other provinces. As you well know, every other province does direct funding, the same direct funding that you said would fragment and undermine education. So what you told us here today is that essentially you believe that direct funding would fragment and undermine education, and you also told us that systems that do that are the only ones you rely on for knowing what impact there is, whether it's through enrolment or other negative impacts on public education.

I find that a bit incredible, and I wonder if you would tell us again, Minister, if you say direct funding is a bad

thing and none of those provinces are doing the voucher or the tax credit that you've proposed to this province today, or that you're endorsing today on behalf of the government, how can you stand in your place and tell us that it won't be harmful? How can you say that?

Hon Mrs Ecker: Because, Mr Kennedy, first of all, at the time that the United Nations issue was going on, there was no place to take the funding other than from the Ministry of Education. There was no other government policy, government initiative, government budget line to fund such an initiative, however it was done. I do not believe that taking money from the public education system to support the tax credit is an appropriate policy. The government is proposing to do a tax credit of resources that are not going to be coming from the public education system. I appreciate that people agree or disagree with that, depending on where they come from. This is one of those issues, as many issues are in education, where there are significant differences of opinion. But certainly my job as Minister of Education is to ensure that we are meeting the commitments we made about better quality, better accountability, and increasing an investment in the public education system. That is indeed what we will continue to do.

Mr Kennedy: Minister, several times you said, "We've looked at other provinces," when people asked you, "How do you know this will not be harmful?" Yet a year ago, at a minimum, you were describing what goes on in other provinces as not just taking money away but undermining and fragmenting. In your own words today—

Hon Mrs Ecker: Yes, but Mr Kennedy, we're not—

Mr Kennedy: —you said to us that that would hurt public education. Yet you want us to—

Hon Mrs Ecker: But we are not funding like other provinces—

Mr Kennedy: Minister, answer this—

Hon Mrs Ecker: We looked at that, and we made a decision to do something different here.

Mr Kennedy: Minister, isn't it then clearly irresponsible for you to have done no studies into your particular model, the one that you say now today—you say that if you fund with a voucher or a tax credit, which you insist on calling it, it will not harm public education? Your government said otherwise when it spoke to the UN last year, but that's what you're saying to us today. Yet you come before this committee and you haven't got a single research study to show that.

I'll refer you to the Shapiro report, which was done in 1985, commissioned under the previous Conservative government. In that study, it said, "Tax credits or vouchers will be the most harmful to the public education system."

What is it that you have to show us today or refer to today that should get people to believe that suddenly the private school voucher or tax credit will have no negative impacts on public education? What is it exactly?

Hon Mrs Ecker: First of all, Mr Kennedy, vouchers are very different from tax credits, and I'd be quite happy

to walk you through or have staff talk about that at some future time. But we are not proposing a voucher program; what we are proposing as a government is a tax credit, a partial credit, for the tuition that parents pay. Critics of this particular initiative are concerned that students will leave the public education system and therefore our investments in the public education system will decrease, will not be as significant. What I am saying to you is that what the government has also said is that our investment in public education will continue and our priority on the public education will continue, and I'm sure there would be a unanimous view here in this room that that system is important, that it should be a priority, should remain a priority, and that remains government policy.

Mr Kennedy: Minister, when you wrote your letter last year you said, "As was set out in the submission to the UNHRC"—you endorsed that—"extending funding to religious private schools"—a narrower policy than the one today—"would result in fragmentation of the education system in Ontario and undermine the goal of universal access."

Can you tell us today how it is that this particular tax credit is so different that it doesn't do exactly the same thing that you talked about before? You didn't say a year and some ago that it was because of the funding; you said the nature of doing this would do that. If you look at the United Nations report, which you endorsed in your letter—and I'll ask you, Minister, if you wish to, to say that the United Nations report is worthless or doesn't have any value with you. What is it about the private school tax credit that makes it so much safer than the funding that was your concern in January 2000 that would have such catastrophic effects for public education? What's the difference?

Hon Mrs Ecker: Mr Kennedy, it's important to recognize that if you believe parental choice is an important value, which this government, this caucus subscribes to—I understand that in the Liberal Party you want to put qualifiers around whether or not you believe in parental choice—the government's view is that parental choice, if you're going to respect it, you respect it. Parents had come to the government and said that they wished their choice to be respected if they wished to go to independent schools.

We have parents who choose to school their children at home, and one of the things the throne speech made very clear is that we would also respect that particular parental choice and would take steps to better support those parents who school their children at home. So there is an important value here that the government support parental choice, and the government has chosen to not put a fence around that parental choice simply in the public system. While that remains the priority, they wish to extend that for parents who choose to go to independent schools.

1750

Mr Kennedy: Minister, I know you know this isn't semantics. You're the Minister of Education and you're the highest-ranking elected official charged with that

direct responsibility. When you say to us that somehow parental choice makes it OK, every other jurisdiction sells parental choice as direct funding to schools as well. So, I ask you again—

Hon Mrs Ecker: Well, then, we disagree with those other jurisdictions, with all due respect to them.

Mr Kennedy: I ask you again, Minister, what is it about this private school tax credit that makes it so much safer? Why were things catastrophic a year and some ago in January—and, by the way, the United Nations report talks about both partial and full funding, and you've endorsed that. But leaving that aside for the moment, can you tell us, as the expert, as the ranking layperson but representing all the people of the province in this regard, what is it about this tax credit that makes it so much safer than the full funding that you were so afraid of approximately a year and a bit ago?

Hon Mrs Ecker: What I think is important to recognize is that the government has clearly said that money for the public education system, investments in the public education system, will continue. So there will not be an impact which none of us would agree with on the public education system as a result of this particular proposal, should it come to pass. Certainly there were people who expressed a concern that funding independent schools in whatever fashion would be harmful to public education. The government has heard that concern and that's why we have also said that we will ensure that investments continue.

But there's something else also. The debate here, between your comments and Mr Hampton's comments, has accepted the fallacy that we should measure how good our public system is by how much we spend on it. If that were indeed true, then jurisdictions that are spending less on education should not be doing as well as Ontario students. But what we have seen is that there are jurisdictions out there that spend less than Ontario and their students actually perform better. I think that's an important thing to get on the record, that measuring how successful our system is by strictly how much we spend on it is not necessarily an accurate assumption to start with, as Mr Kennedy has done.

Mr Kennedy: Madam Minister, with the greatest of respect, you're an honourable member. A year and a bit ago you said there was a terrible problem if you funded private schools, and today you haven't given us a single reason why the tax credit is safer—not one. You've talked about many other subjects, and I'm sure there's an extensive audience for that, but frankly it is startling and alarming that you haven't been able to give us that particular assurance.

Now, Minister, on the matter—

Hon Mrs Ecker: Well, we have given you an assurance, Mr Kennedy, that this government's priority remains and will continue to remain the public system and to ensure that there are not negative consequences for the public system.

Mr Kennedy: Was your government's priority different when you wrote this letter? When you wrote this

letter in January 2000, could you not believe that your government was still committed to public education? Is that what's changed between then and now?

Hon Mrs Ecker: The government's commitment to public education remains. It is our priority. It is, as you know, the second-biggest budget priority for the government, the first being health. I think it is important that that commitment continue to be restated because it is indeed the truth.

Mr Kennedy: But was it different back then when you had your concerns? Was the reason you thought public funding for private schools would be harmful because your government was not committed then, and now it is committed to making sure public education is funded?

Hon Mrs Ecker: The question was taking money from the public education system to fund independent schools, and it would have indeed been harmful to have done that. That is not what the government is proposing to do. Our commitments to the public education system stand, as they should. I think it's an important priority.

Mr Kennedy: Minister, again, you are the most expert person in the province, by nomination of the cabinet and the Premier. When a child leaves a school to take advantage directly, as an incentive, because they like what you've done—the \$3,500 has given them enough reason to leave—if that student leaves Parkdale Collegiate or Humberdale Collegiate or any school in the province, doesn't your student-focused funding cause there to be less money available for the school that they left? Isn't that absolutely correct?

Hon Mrs Ecker: If all we did was fund school boards on just—

Mr Kennedy: Could you answer the question, Minister, please?

Hon Mrs Ecker: Well, Mr Kennedy, I am answering the question. I appreciate you may not agree with the answer, but that's fair. It's part of the process, democratic or otherwise. If all we did was to fund boards just on enrolment, you could make that argument. But we have made a deliberate policy choice to fund in addition to enrolment in a whole range of sectors and I think that is an important distinction.

Mr Kennedy: Minister, that would be very enlightening. I appreciate your raising that. Would you tell us, then, out of the approximately \$6,968 that you're providing this year per student, what portion of that is not tied to an individual child in the school, is not tied to enrolment? What portion of that is free from that?

Hon Mrs Ecker: For example, as you heard from Mr Nameth, we frequently fund school boards based on the nature of the schools themselves. We fund school boards on remote and rural activity. If they have—

Mr Kennedy: I know you—

Hon Mrs Ecker: Mr Kennedy, you've asked the question. Let me answer it.

Mr Kennedy: But I asked for a number. With all respect, I did ask for a number.

Hon Mrs Ecker: You can't take apart—

Mr Kennedy: A percentage?

Hon Mrs Ecker: You can't take apart the formula, the numbers, in a split second to come up with questions that are based on wrong assumptions.

Mr Kennedy: It was your assertion, Minister.

Hon Mrs Ecker: No. There are factors in how we give money to school boards that are not simply enrolment. For example, a school that has high inner-city needs, a proportion of their student population that may have high inner-city needs, that school board gets additional dollars because of the higher needs of their students. We have school boards that have schools that represent very wide geographic areas. That wide geographic area—

Mr McGuinty: Minister—

Hon Mrs Ecker: Just a second, Mr Kennedy—

Mr Kennedy: Minister, I'm sorry—

Hon Mrs Ecker: That wide geographic area means they get additional dollars. So there are adjustments made every year for boards that are different than enrolment. To look at the other factors, because if all we did—

Mr Kennedy: Minister, in both of those cases, they depend on the number of pupils that are in those boards. But I will defer to your greater expertise in this if you would agree to reference this and to have it brought back on a piece of paper to show to the province—because I think there's great interest in this—how much of the funding is not dependent on an individual student being there. Would you agree to bring that back to us, because you said, and I think it's fair, that it will take time to prepare such a figure?

Hon Mrs Ecker: Mr Kennedy, obviously, if you have funding that reflects costs that schools and school boards have, enrolment is a significant factor. We've made no argument to the contrary. But we also have funded boards above enrolment and the figures are very clear that some school boards, for example—

Mr Kennedy: Minister—

Hon Mrs Ecker: Mr Kennedy, let me finish.

Mr Kennedy: But you're not answering my question.

Hon Mrs Ecker: You have some schools that have had a decline in enrolment and their funding has in-

creased. The figures are very clear. So that, I think, is important to recognize.

Mr Kennedy: We'll look forward to the information if you can bring it forward.

Mr Peters: A member previously referred to the Thames Valley board. Minister, I wonder what message you would send to the trustees and administrators who are deliberating a budget right now, looking at bigger classes, fewer computers, longer lineups for students with special needs, students needing psychological help that could jump to 14 weeks from six to 10 weeks; a board looking at a \$4-million increase in utilities, a \$1-million increase in transportation, having to find \$17 million in cutbacks to balance the books; 75 full-time jobs, including education assistants, secretaries, literacy teachers, psychologists and speech and language pathologists having to be cut; and a board that's spending some \$3.5 million more on special education than it receives in provincial funding. What message would you send to the board and administrators of the Thames Valley board in their budget deliberations?

Hon Mrs Ecker: I'm sorry, Mr Peters, the deputy and I were just conferring about a number. Sorry, the question at the end?

The Vice-Chair: Unless the member can place it again in under 10 seconds, the response to that will be quite difficult, I would say.

Hon Mrs Ecker: Very quickly, and we can certainly pick this up again, the Thames Valley board's enrolment decreased and yet they had an increase in funding above their enrolment. We certainly appreciate that whether it's the budget of a school board, the budget of your household, the budget of any small or large organization, it is a challenge to stay within a budget and set priorities. It's a very difficult process, but the Thames Valley board has had additional resources and I appreciate that they are attempting to set appropriate priorities for their community.

The Vice-Chair: I want to thank you. We will adjourn for today and resume tomorrow after orders of the day.

The committee adjourned at 1801.

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