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Tuesday 9 May 2006

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des débats
(Hansard)**

Mardi 9 mai 2006

**Standing committee on
estimates**

Ministry of Education

**Comité permanent des
budgets des dépenses**

Ministère de l'Éducation

Chair: Cameron Jackson
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LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF ONTARIO

ASSEMBLÉE LÉGISLATIVE DE L'ONTARIO

STANDING COMMITTEE ON
ESTIMATESCOMITÉ PERMANENT DES
BUDGETS DES DÉPENSES

Tuesday 9 May 2006

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The committee met at 1555 in room 228.

MINISTRY OF EDUCATION

The Chair (Mr. Cameron Jackson): I'd like to call to order the standing committee on estimates.

We have two items of business. I have a letter expressing regrets from Deputy Minister Ben Levin, who had a prior engagement and was unable to be here; he called me about that. We are pleased to welcome Kevin French and Nancy Naylor, both assistant deputy ministers from the Ministry of Education, and the minister.

We have two rotations remaining. Mr. Klees has 20 minutes and Mr. Marchese has 10, and that should bring our time with these estimates to a close. I will then be calling for the vote.

We have some additional responses, which the clerk will be circulating.

Mr. Klees, you have the floor.

Mr. Frank Klees (Oak Ridges): Minister, I'd like to address the issue of the teachers' pension fund. Marilies Rettig reported to her membership that as of January 1, 2006, the funding deficit for the plan would be close to \$30 billion. Are you aware of that deficit?

Hon. Sandra Pupatello (Minister of Education, minister responsible for women's issues): Perhaps you're going to have additional questions, and then I'll be able to turn it over to Nancy Naylor to address the teacher pension issue.

Mr. Klees: I just would like to know whether you as the minister are aware of that deficit.

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: Without having had an opportunity to speak to the board directly, I certainly am aware of the various media items that have appeared recently about this issue, yes.

Mr. Klees: Clearly there is an issue here for the government. The report from Ms. Rettig to her membership states very clearly that, "A valuation must be filed by January 1, 2005. We have a one-time-only opportunity to do this because of recent changes to the Pension Benefits Act. No change should be made. A contribution rate increase for both teachers and government is unavoidable and should be phased in." This is apparently a solution to this \$30-billion deficit that exists. Have there been any conclusions in terms of how to deal with this deficit by the funding partners?

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: No, there is no conclusion.

Mr. Klees: There is a contribution rate increase for both teachers and government that is unavoidable. Would you agree with that statement?

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: No, but if you have further questions, I am going to turn it over to Nancy Naylor to address this issue. I'm just not sure how many more there are. If any of them are detailed and financial, I'm happy to have her speak to this.

Ms. Nancy Naylor: We are aware of the valuation situation that is facing the Ontario teachers' pension plan. The figure that you quoted is associated with what the plan would describe as their 2006 valuation issue. There is a different number, a slightly smaller number, that's associated with the 2005 valuation issue. I believe Ms. Rettig's material to her members has referred to that in the past.

The partners in the plan are the government and the Ontario Teachers' Federation, and as partners we have been discussing the approach to resolving that valuation situation. It will involve contribution rate increases and increases in the province's contributions to the plans. We are in discussions with the OTF about the approach that we'll be taking.

Mr. Klees: According to this report, the deadline for a decision is the end of June. Is that correct?

Ms. Naylor: Yes, it is.

Mr. Klees: This report also indicates that, "The executive has had meetings with the government pension partner. We are pleased to report that we have substantial agreement on the following issues: first, that a January 1, 2005, valuation should be filed; second, that there should be no reduction in the benefits in the Ontario teachers' pension plan." Is that correct?

Ms. Naylor: That is the position of the Ontario Teachers' Federation, yes.

Mr. Klees: But this states that this agreement has been reached with the government pension partner. So are you saying that the government has not agreed to that?

Ms. Naylor: At this stage of the discussion on the options available to the plan members, not the beneficiaries but the two partners—the government of Ontario and the Ontario Teachers' Federation—we are still at the stage of discussing the options available to us to resolve the valuation issue.

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Mr. Klees: So there may be a reduction in benefits in the Ontario teachers' pension plan?

Ms. Naylor: To date, the Ontario Teachers' Federation has been clear about their position that there should not be reductions.

Mr. Klees: What is the government's position?

Ms. Naylor: The government is still in discussions with its partner on the solutions and options available to it.

Mr. Klees: It states further that an increase in contribution rates for both teachers and government is unavoidable. Would you agree with that statement?

Ms. Naylor: Yes.

Mr. Klees: What is the estimated increase in rates that the government would have to pay under this arrangement, and what is the total bottom-line cost to the taxpayer as a result?

Ms. Naylor: That would be highly dependent on the options available to the plan members and to the plan partners, so it would be premature to say what that would be.

Mr. Klees: Do you have any estimates from your actuaries in terms of what that cost might be?

Ms. Naylor: Again, there are a number of solutions and options, and there are discussions about which path to take to resolve the valuation issue.

Mr. Klees: It would be substantial, would it not? Thirty billion dollars is a significant gap, a significant deficit for a pension fund.

Ms. Naylor: What would be important to note is that the valuation issue that will be addressed will likely be the 2005 valuation, which is smaller than the 30—

Mr. Klees: And how much smaller is it?

Ms. Naylor: It's estimated at about \$19 billion.

Mr. Klees: Nineteen billion. That is still a significant amount of money, is it not? I'm trying to get a sense here. I don't want to be difficult, but surely there's an impact to the taxpayer if there's an increase in rates. I'm trying to determine where we might ultimately see that in the government's estimates. Has any provision been made in the estimates for that increased rate?

Ms. Naylor: On the provincial side of that, yes, it has, and that has to do with the province being on PSAB accounting. So for pension responsibilities, the province deals with that on an annual basis. The province has been making provision for that, so on a cash basis it would go up. On a fiscal basis, it—

Mr. Klees: Could you point me to the place in the estimates where that would be found?

Ms. Naylor: Yes, we'll find the page. But it is in the Ministry of Education—there is an allocation number for our ministry and then there is an allocation number for the teachers' pension plan. I believe it's about \$400 million for this year. That is the province's contribution on a fiscal basis for the 2006-07 fiscal year.

Mr. Klees: And is that fully funded?

Ms. Naylor: Yes.

Mr. Klees: You don't have any idea what the increased cost to the taxpayer would be in the coming fiscal year resulting from this agreement that you are about to enter into with the teachers' pension fund?

Ms. Naylor: Because of the way the provincial accounting works for pension funds, that would anticipate that the valuation issue would be addressed by the province.

Mr. Klees: Okay. Chair, what I would like to receive is a detailed accounting of how the government is in fact accounting for this anticipated cost. I'd like to get a sense of what those increased rates are going to be, the contribution rates, and as soon as it has been firmed up, that there be a report to the committee to that effect.

The Chair: Duly noted. You have 12 minutes, Mr. Klees.

Mr. Klees: My next question is to the minister. Minister, just very quickly on this point, the last time we were together I asked you very specifically if you were aware of a petition to the Legislature relating to funding of faith-based schools. You had indicated that you had no idea about that petition. None of your staff seemed to know about it. I just want to know: Have you seen that petition since then? Have you had anyone bring it to your attention?

Hon. Ms. Papatello: Yes, I believe you asked some questions, and we're preparing a response for you regarding the petition. I have not read the petition. I can tell you that since we last met at estimates, I have read a number of things, and at some point that petition will likely be on the list of things to read. But as of yet, I have not read the petition.

Mr. Klees: Just so that you get one, I'll table one with the Chair. If you could pass that on to the minister.

There was another petition that was circulated by your own colleagues, I'm assuming in response to this. It was a petition that was read into the Legislature on three different occasions. Specifically, Minister, it talks about the people of Ontario demanding quality education; it talks about Premier McGuinty and the Liberal caucus fighting for the future of public schools, including smaller class size; and then it talks about the Conservative Party and John Tory, who "want to take millions from public education to literally pay people to withdraw their children from the public system and send them to elite private schools." Are you familiar with this petition?

Hon. Ms. Papatello: No, I'm not.

Mr. Klees: I want to table this petition with the committee, because I would like to get the minister's view on how appropriate it is. This particular petition has eight signatures. Seven of those signatures are Liberal MPPs. I just want to know from the minister whether she feels that is an appropriate use of petitions in this place, and whether that is messaging that she as the Minister of Education approves of. I'll table this.

Do you approve of that?

Hon. Ms. Papatello: To be fair, I must tell you that because ministers aren't allowed to table petitions, as a cabinet minister I don't tend to be in the House in the 15 minutes allocated to deliver petitions, as I used to be—and I used to be a strong advocate of bringing petitions. I believe that all people, regardless of what party they might represent, should deliver petitions on behalf of

their constituents. I also agree that, despite my not agreeing with the content of a petition, it is my duty as an MPP to table petitions on behalf of my constituents. In my history, the last 11 years, on many occasions I have tabled petitions that I don't personally agree with, but these people deserve a voice.

As the Minister of Education, what will happen in the right number of days—because we do have a number of days, according to the standing orders, to respond to the petitions that are tabled. So all of the petitions that are being tabled now, since I've become minister, will be put before me to respond to them. I'm happy to respond to the one that you've read here as well.

Mr. Klees: Thank you.

Chair, if there's a representative from the EQAO, I'd like to address them for the balance of my time.

The Chair: Yes, there is. I'd like to welcome, from the Education Quality and Accountability Office, its executive director, Marguerite Jackson, and the vice-chair, Mr. Jerry Ponikvar. Thank you for attending today. We appreciate your presence.

Mr. Klees: Thank you so much for being here. I unfortunately don't have much time with you, but I'd like to address an issue that has been raised on a number of occasions over the last number of months, and that is the quality of the testing that's taking place. There have been suggestions that the government is actually lowering standards to meet their particular pass rates.

One of the very practical issues is that students are being allowed to use calculators while doing the EQAO tests. My question to you is very simple: Has that always been the case? Have students always been allowed to use calculators while doing mathematics tests?

Mr. Jerry Ponikvar: Mr. Chair and committee, I want to say on behalf of Marguerite and myself that we're very pleased to be here and to join you for this committee.

You have raised, Mr. Klees, several questions. One is a matter of standards. I can assure you that the standards that we started with are being maintained by the agency. Just two years ago, in fact, we had a panel of 22 experts of national and international background who checked out our processes. We did this because we felt that it was the time in the history of our agency to do a review to see where we're at, how well we're doing and what we need to do to make any improvements to ensure that the quality of education in this province is occurring in the classrooms.

I can say to you that the agency was given an endorsement by this panel when they said to us, "Your assessments are of world class." We were very proud to hear that this panel, who were totally objective, felt the way they did when they reviewed our total operation in terms of what we were doing.

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In terms of calculators, calculators are another manipulative that is used in the curriculum today in mathematics. It's a manipulative, just as other resources are used in terms of mathematics by the children in the

classrooms. I can say to you that they aren't the basic first line of use when children are learning concepts and skills or basic operations in mathematics. They're used to reinforce what concepts and understanding the children have to arrive at answers. But the focus is still on children understanding the process of what happens when I subtract one number from another.

Mr. Klees: Sorry, I don't want to interrupt you. I'm concerned that we're going to run out of time. My question was very specific. Has there been a change in policy? Under EQAO testing, have students always been allowed to use calculators in mathematics tests?

Mr. Ponikvar: I'll turn that over to Marguerite.

Ms. Marguerite Jackson: Yes, calculators have been a part of the tools that students could bring to the test situation. This is because calculators are directly spoken about in the Ontario curriculum as one of the tools that students should have available to them. This is consistent, has been in the past and will continue.

Mr. Klees: So there's been no change in policy regarding the administration of these tests?

Ms. Jackson: There's been no change in the availability of calculators.

Mr. Klees: Okay. Thank you for clarifying that. There's been a lot of misinformation about that.

I'd like to know, does shortening the time of the tests in any way impact the outcome, in your opinion? Or, let me put it this way: What was the reason for reducing the time for the tests?

Mr. Ponikvar: Would you like to answer that?

Ms. Jackson: We went through an extensive review process that involved input from stakeholders, reviewing what other jurisdictions did in large-scale assessments and receiving input from the international panel that Mr. Ponikvar spoke about. One of the outcomes of that investigation was an identification that we could provide to the public a confidence in the level of achievement of students in this province with a shorter assessment. We could also provide to the teaching profession valuable information that would allow them to have professional dialogue that would support their actions in the interests of improved student achievement. We've been very meticulous about the processes we've used to assure that we still cover the curriculum aspects that we've covered before and that our assessments are comparable. Yes, they are shorter but, yes, they are comparable and, yes, they are valid and reliable results.

Mr. Klees: And you are comfortable and confident that you have the necessary resources available to your organization to carry out those tests?

Mr. Ponikvar: Yes, we are. The agency in the last four years, as you've noted in the budgets that have been allotted to EQAO, has been able, through efficiencies and use of technologies in terms of scanning tests, in terms of still maintaining confidentiality and reporting more effectively—the budget has been reduced by about 25%. As a member of the board, we're truly proud of what the agency has been able to accomplish in terms of those efficiencies. I'm pleased to report that to you today.

Mr. Klees: Mr. Chair, I have a request of the EQAO. Could they provide us with their analysis of the performance of Ontario students based on the tests they administer compared to other jurisdictions—other provinces—in Canada and perhaps some jurisdictions within the United States and internationally? I'm assuming that those numbers are available, and I'd like to get that summary from the outset, from the implementation of your tests through to this point. I think it would be very helpful for us to see what progress our students are making and at the same time some commentary in terms of the standards of those tests, the expectations that are built into those tests, compared to these other jurisdictions.

Mr. Ponikvar: You don't want us to answer that today—

Mr. Klees: No, no. That's a take-away.

Mr. Ponikvar: —you'd like us to get that information and provide it to you? Of course.

Mr. Klees: We look forward to receiving that.

Mr. Ponikvar: I can just say, perhaps in capsule form, that our tests are truly unique in Ontario, because they are based on curriculum outcomes or the expectations. Often we hear that teachers teach to the test. We say that if they're teaching to the test, they're teaching to the expectations of the curriculum. If you went into a classroom today, I think you would see that there has been an influence in what is happening in terms of the implementation of today's curriculum as a result of this engine of assessment, which is driving good, solid pedagogy; learning-teaching strategies; and differentiated learning for children, not only the regular learner but those with special needs as well.

Mr. Klees: With regard to special needs, I'd also like a report from you relating to the accommodation that is made for special-needs students and ESL students and how that factors into the outcome of the test, if you would do that for us.

Mr. Ponikvar: We could provide that.

Mr. Rosario Marchese (Trinity-Spadina): Mr. Chair, I have a question, and then I'll move on to the minister.

The Chair: I'm in your hands.

Mr. Marchese: Thank you so much; I like that.

Madame Jackson, here's a question on calculators that Mr. Klees would have liked to ask. We, as New Democrats, do not dispute the use of calculators; that is not the issue. The real point is that in the past, under the Tories, students were able to use calculators only for certain types of questions. There were two booklets. One booklet was multiple-choice questions. For that part of it, they could not use calculators, and now they can. Is that correct?

Ms. Jackson: They no longer have that separate booklet of multiple-choice questions. With the improved design of the assessment, the test is in one booklet and students are allowed to bring the tools of mathematics to the test with them.

Mr. Marchese: Right. But you understand my question?

Ms. Jackson: I understand your question.

Mr. Marchese: They can now use the calculators for the multiple-choice questions. They couldn't before.

Ms. Jackson: The improved design of the assessment is different from the booklet 1, multiple choice, and students are allowed to bring the tool to the test with them. The significant thing—

Mr. Marchese: No, no, Madame Jackson. It's—

The Chair: Rosario, please. Ms. Jackson will tighten her answer, and I'll give you another two minutes if it takes a little longer for her to explain it—

Mr. Marchese: But I don't want that, because I want to move on to the next—

The Chair: I'm going to get you there as quickly as possible, but let Ms. Jackson answer the question and then—

Mr. Marchese: It was a very simple question, actually. I don't want an elaboration.

The Chair: Please proceed with your simple question.

Mr. Marchese: I don't need an elaboration of how you changed the test. All I wanted you to clarify was that there were two tests that were given, two booklets. For one booklet they could use the calculators, correct?

Ms. Jackson: Correct.

Mr. Marchese: For the other, they couldn't.

Ms. Jackson: Correct.

Mr. Marchese: Okay. Thank you.

Ms. Jackson: May I add that the significance of not being able to use them with the one booklet was that—the purpose of using a calculator is that the student has to determine when it's appropriate and know how to use it. When the multiple-choice questions are blended through one booklet, there isn't the same ease that there would have been in the design we had previously. So the improved design allows students to make determinations about the tools.

The Chair: Thank you very much, both of you.

Mr. Marchese: I now have a question for the minister and staff. Minister, I submitted some questions so I wouldn't have to read them for the record and waste too much time, because I want to get on to Bill 78; as you might imagine, people are waiting for us. I'm going to ask some quick questions on ESL, and then we're rushing off to the other meeting.

How many ESL teachers are currently employed in Ontario? Do we know that?

Hon. Ms. Papatello: I will find out if I can have that number for you. I'm not aware of the number, but I'll see if I can get it for you.

Mr. Marchese: Is staff aware of the number?

Ms. Naylor: I would say that we don't ask boards to designate which teachers are ESL, so it would be hard for us to answer that.

Mr. Marchese: So you don't really track how many teachers we have, how many are teaching ESL? We don't really track that.

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: We may in fact track how many are teaching ESL, but I can't tell you how many are designated as just ESL teachers. As I said, I will look and see if we can supply you with that information.

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Mr. Marchese: Okay. Are you familiar with the recent People for Education report on ESL teachers?

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: Actually, the most recent report I've read from them that that produced was regarding libraries and librarians, but I haven't read their report on ESL.

Mr. Marchese: This is on ESL. Is the staff familiar with this report?

The Chair: Let the record show that Ms. Naylor nodded and we got a yes.

Mr. Marchese: Minister, you see that the ESL program is declining across the province from 1997-98?

The Chair: Your graph is equally as impressive on the Hansard record.

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: I'd like to see how that gets represented in Hansard.

Mr. Marchese: It says the following, Minister: that "36% of schools have ESL programs, down from 58% in 1997-98." It's impressive. From 58% in 1997-98, we're 36% in 2005-06. So under your government we've dipped a little bit; we're 36%.

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: Without all of the detail and how they arrived at the data, I think it's fair to say that Ontario has been in declining enrolment for many years as well. So it is in fact very localized, the issue of ESL.

Mr. Marchese: So part of the data you might provide for me, including how many ESL teachers—you might be able to provide data that talks about—

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: Where they are—

Mr. Marchese: —factors that affect ESL?

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: Because I think those things are important, yes.

Mr. Marchese: I think so too.

The same report talks about the GTA and it says that "71% of all Ontario's ESL students are in the GTA," and "only 51% of GTA schools have ESL teachers," which is "a decline from 55% last year, and 68% in 1999-2000."

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: But again, without understanding all of the data arriving to summarize like that, it could also be extremely localized in that there is half of a board's geography that wouldn't include schools that need ESL programming but there would be other communities and neighbourhoods where all of the schools in those neighbourhoods would. That's why it's important to note how data is collected, how it's being presented—

Mr. Marchese: Exactly, and this is why it's so important for the ministry to be able to produce its own report, because they refused to do this when they were in government. By "they" I mean the Tories, for the record. You raise interesting points, and it would be lovely to have a report from you in terms of what's been happening in ESL to explain these factors and these changes, because I know you're keenly interested in this, and so am I. Could you help us out with producing a report for

us that would help me to understand this a little bit better?

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: As I move forward in—and as this member knows, the importance of the grants for student needs that are pending now with boards, then—

Mr. Marchese: You might fix that, then.

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: What I am saying now is that it's significant for me to get a very full understanding of a number of issues as they impact the grants, because the grants are due shortly. One of those areas is certainly ESL.

Mr. Marchese: I would just love, from you and your ministry, a tracking report on ESL, with an explanation, as you're providing, in terms of factors that affect it across the province.

The last question I would have of you is that a lot of boards are simply—they don't have ESL monies sweated. That means the money they should be getting for ESL is not going to the programs. That's a problem for me, and I'm sure it is for you too.

Interjection.

Mr. Marchese: "Sweated" means just that—

Interjection.

Mr. Marchese: Oh, okay. Sorry; I was just using a term that—

Interjection.

Mr. Marchese: You're quite right, and I apologize. You're right.

So money should be directed to ESL or FSL, and at the moment it isn't. So boards are stealing money from various programs to make ends meet. I think it's wrong. Do you agree that money should be directed specifically for ESL and that it should not be touched? That's the question I put to you.

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: I think it's fair to say that the boards like to have flexibility when they've been delayed the funding from the province.

Mr. Marchese: I know they do, but do you agree with that?

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: I also believe that ESL funding has been applied in many ways throughout, as the—and we've already acknowledged that the grant is probably not in its finest form and needs to be addressed. I have also committed to be doing some serious reviews of that formula.

Mr. Marchese: Could the review talk about directing money for ESL, specifically for that?

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: What we have discovered in this discussion about the formula, as it relates to the grants again, which are due soon, is that if ESL funding has been used for teachers' salaries, as you have asked—and so have I in the past—what we find is that it takes teachers often who are delivering the ESL programming, which is what the ESL money is paying for. So if we're paying for the teachers of ESL, then in fact, yes, ESL money is funding teachers and teachers' salaries, but it may well be the teachers who are delivering that ESL. As you know, most of the programming delivered in school boards—85% of their budgets or more may well be personnel.

Mr. Marchese: A final question: Do you think that money should be specifically dedicated for ESL and it cannot be touched by boards? Do you agree with that, or no?

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: I think that what I need first, before I can even be in a position to answer that question, is the opportunity to do a review of the programming to determine that boards are adapting what it is they're adapting as ESL programming—because I believe it is being applied in very different ways across Ontario. Some of that differentiation may be good.

Mr. Marchese: Thank you, Minister. I'd like to move on to the next committee.

The Chair: The next committee has already begun.

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: I'm going to miss you, though, Rosario.

Mr. Marchese: I know; me too.

The Chair: By agreement, I wish to state that the time has expired for the estimates for the Ministry of

Education. At this time I would like to call the vote, if everyone is ready.

Shall vote 1001 carry? All those in favour? Opposed, if any? That's carried.

Shall vote 1002 carry? All those in favour? Opposed, if any? It is carried.

Shall vote 1003 carry? All those in favour? Opposed, if any? That is carried.

Shall the estimates of the Ministry of Education carry? Those in favour? Opposed, if any? It is carried.

Shall I report the estimates of the Ministry of Education to the House? All those in favour? Opposed, if any? That is carried.

This meeting stands adjourned until tomorrow immediately following routine proceedings in room 228, at which time we'll begin the estimates for the Ministry of Community and Social Services.

The committee adjourned at 1627.

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