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Wednesday 26 April 2006

**Standing committee on
estimates**

Ministry of Education

Journal des débats (Hansard)

Mercredi 26 avril 2006

**Comité permanent des
budgets des dépenses**

Ministère de l'Éducation

Chair: Cameron Jackson
Clerk: Katch Koch

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LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF ONTARIO

ASSEMBLÉE LÉGISLATIVE DE L'ONTARIO

STANDING COMMITTEE ON
ESTIMATESCOMITÉ PERMANENT DES
BUDGETS DES DÉPENSES

Wednesday 26 April 2006

Mercredi 26 avril 2006

The committee met at 1552 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 completed the first set rotation.

I'm just going to get Clay to get the right—Clay, there's a ton of reverb on this. If you'd tone it down a bit, that would be great; it's not going to be easy on everybody else's ears.

Mr. Rosario Marchese (Trinity–Spadina): If I can ask people to speak up in this place. I can't ever hear.

The Chair: Okay.

Before I begin, I just wanted to clarify. There have been some questions raised about the role of legislative research. Legislative research is here for the committee's support insofar as they respond to questions that are raised, and they can be directed by members of the committee. So, although David McIver is monitoring the questions you raise for a given ministry, his primary function is to go out and get you research, if you want that research, dealing with, in this case, matters to do with education, from the library or from other jurisdictions or whatever.

As far as the ministry is concerned, the ministry is required to monitor their own estimates, and they are to respond. So legislative research isn't here to be a support to the ministry; it's here to be a support to the committee. I'm trusting that the deputy has made arrangements to have these estimates closely monitored with respect to the questions and they will be able to react to those. Okay? Are there any questions about any of that? Good.

Deputy, do you have any of these questions available for the committee at this point?

Mr. Ben Levin: We will have responses to some questions during the hearing today. They are coming over, so the minister will notify you as soon as that material arrives.

The Chair: Very good. It would be custom to give us sufficient copies, if that would be okay, and that way the clerk doesn't have to run out of the room to get them photocopied. I don't want to pick favourites and give one to the person who asked them; I'd like to give them to the entire committee at the same time. Thank you very much.

All right, no other questions of clarification?

Let me start by saying we have six hours and 55 minutes remaining. So because we're at the top of the hour, I'm recommending we do 20-minute rotations. There will be two of those for each party, and I will begin with Mr. Klees. Mr. Klees, we're in your hands.

Mr. Frank Klees (Oak Ridges): Thank you, Chair. Minister, a quick question, first off. I notice under agencies, boards and commissions that there appears to be no funding allotted to the Ontario Parent Council. All of the other agencies, boards and commissions have a budget amount allocated. I don't see anything there. Can you explain why there wouldn't be?

Hon. Sandra Pupatello (Minister of Education, minister responsible for women's issues): Can you tell us what pages you're looking at?

Mr. Klees: I'm looking at page 7 of the briefing book, and I assumed that what I see here are the agencies, boards and commissions broken out and the relative funding allotted to them. The Ontario Parent Council is absent. It doesn't show up there at all.

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: I can't tell you. I'll try to get you more detail. But as for it not showing up here, you're probably aware of an announcement that was made some months ago that directed money to every single parent council in every school. We think this is a significant investment, but it also speaks to the parent engagement strategy that we have begun to employ over the last two and a half years. So they, this year, were receiving some \$500 per parent council to identify projects that will help in a number of areas. For example, if there's an area where parents aren't engaging as the community would like them to, then there might be projects they might select to help engage the parents in the process with their schools. I can't remember the total number, but in fact it worked out to \$500 per parent council across Ontario, and that was an announcement made several months ago.

Mr. Klees: Okay. Then if you could get back to us with an explanation as to why specifically the Ontario Parent Council is not referenced in these budget documents, how much is allocated to the Ontario Parent Council and what envelope that's coming out of. Okay?

People for Education is—Chair, this is very uncomfortable. If you could tone this down. Can you not turn the volume down? Okay. Testing: one, two. That's a lot better. Thank you.

People for Education is a lobby group, and it's my understanding that they received some \$50,000 from the

Ministry of Education for their annual conference last year. A representative from the minister's office said that People for Education received the money because they're funding a program for parental inclusion. I think that was the explanation. To what program would this \$50,000 grant be attributable?

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: Once again, when I get you the information on parent engagement and exactly where all the money went and what line it would be attributed to, it will likely be in that information that we'll provide you.

Mr. Klees: Okay. Are there established guidelines for organizations such as People for Education? The Organization for Quality Education I assume would fall into that same category, or the federation of home and schools. Are there any guidelines published under which organizations like that can apply for funding to the ministry?

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: I can imagine that in the two and a half years that the former minister had, a significant part of the portfolio was to engage parents in the public education system. So to the extent that they would have been assigned funding, it would in fact be to help support the public education system. As to the various groups you've mentioned, we can certainly see what they may have had historically over, say, the last 15 years. I don't know what funding they would have received. But again, once we get for you the background on the funding, it will likely come at least with a paragraph on what the money was intended to do.

1600

Mr. Klees: Okay. We would expect that if funding is being allocated by the ministry to organizations such as this, it would be done within a framework of established guidelines that the ministry has. I would ask in your response, when you get back to us, if you would provide the specific guidelines that exist for People for Education. What I'm really asking beyond that is whether other organizations such as People for Education have equal access to funding from the ministry and, if so, what is the process under which organizations like that would apply for it and then where in the estimates we would find the allocation for that. Okay? Thank you.

I'd like to move on to an issue that relates really to two aspects of your ministry: One is the cap on the lower class sizes, as well as the issue of rural schools. I'm going to refer to a letter that you received from the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario dated April 21. Mr. Marchese and I were copied on it. You've had a chance to see that letter, I assume.

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: I've not received it.

Mr. Klees: Perhaps the deputy has.

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: Can you tell me the topic as well?

Mr. Klees: The topic relates to grants for student needs and the issue of moving grade 7 and 8 students into secondary schools.

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: I've not received this letter, but go ahead.

Mr. Klees: Perhaps the deputy can help you with this. I'd like to just read from it. It's addressed to you, and it speaks to the issue of grants for student needs and the funding gap, if you will, that we were talking about yesterday. This zeroes in on this specific issue:

"As you are well aware ... a number of school boards are still in the position of assessing the viability of small rural schools and are considering a number of options, including moving grade 7 and 8 students to secondary schools. Currently, 12 public district school boards have created at least one secondary school with grades 7 to 12. The federation has serious concerns about this restructuring of elementary and secondary education."

My first question to you, Minister: Is this shifting of grade 7 and 8 students into secondary schools endorsed by your ministry and is it something that you personally, as the Minister of Education, endorse?

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: Let me say first off that I know this isn't a new phenomenon. It's been in Ontario for some time. It certainly exists in the city where I come from. I would like my deputy, though, from an education perspective, to speak to the philosophy of education. I'd like him to address this for you.

Mr. Levin: There are quite a few different arrangements of grade levels in schools in Ontario and elsewhere. We have K to 6, K to 8, K to 12, 7 to 12, 9 to 12. The separation of panels in Ontario—K to 8, 9 to 12—with different federations is a particular Ontario artifact. You would not find that in other provinces, in fact, and you wouldn't find it in most other countries. So grade arrangement will depend on local circumstances, and boards essentially make the determination of how best to organize their grades to take advantage of physical space, where they have facilities. They may have shop, for example, in a school that they want grades 7 and 8 students to have access to. The K to 8 school might be in a rural district some miles down the road, and it makes sense to have those kids in the school where they have access to a better gym or a shop or whatever those facilities may be.

Those decisions are made based on local pragmatics, and the ministry has no particular view on the best way to organize grades, nor do I believe personally that there is any research evidence to suggest that there is a best way to organize grade structure.

Mr. Klees: How many secondary schools would there be in the province that have grades 7 and 8 incorporated into—

Mr. Levin: I don't know that. We have about 800-odd secondary schools all together, and most of them would not. I would guess that you would find this primarily in rural areas or in smaller communities, but I think we could find that out. We have that information and we could provide it.

Mr. Klees: Okay, if you could. I look forward to receiving that, and of course you'll break that down, because I think what I'm hearing you say is that some would have just grade 8, perhaps, and some go back to grade 7. If you could provide us with an analysis and, as

well, the rationale behind that. If you could lay it out for us in terms of the year that that transition was made to incorporate these lower grades.

Mr. Levin: We could certainly tell you how many schools have grades 7 and 8. There would be very few that would just have grade 8; there might be none. It would be 7 and 8 in most cases, because that's kind of a program package. We would not necessarily know when that happened. Some of those arrangements would go back many years. We had K to 12 schools and we still have K to 12 schools in the province, so I'm not sure we could tell you why or when in many cases, because those are local decisions that boards make.

Mr. Klees: Okay.

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: Although the one in Windsor was in the last five years. It was about five years ago that they started, about the year 2000—which isn't rural or northern, actually.

Mr. Klees: I'll quote from this letter. It continues: "Those school boards that have already moved, or are considering moving, grade 7 and 8 students to secondary schools are doing so for financial not pedagogical reasons. Research shows that young adolescents do better in elementary schools." It goes on to talk about the fact that students will do much better if in fact they are segregated by lower grades, if you will.

Obviously, the Elementary Teachers' Federation feels strongly about this. They're bringing it to your attention. They close by saying, "I urge you to review this issue as your ministry updates the provincial education funding formula," and it's signed by Emily Noble.

Minister, do you have any personal thoughts? I know you're early in the game on this, but do you have a sense that this in fact should be something that you should be taking into consideration as you review the funding formula? Is that a direction you're prepared to give to your ministry?

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: What I have realized in these very early days is that I think that, as a ministry, we need to become far more involved in evidence-based policies so that when we move forward, we're actually moving from a position of the ministry adopting a position in terms of best practices in education and working with our board partners in that implementation. In some of the experiences in the few days, obviously, that I've seen, there's a tremendous amount of excellence out in the field, and many boards would benefit from that.

As to this one in particular, I remember taking this cause up with your government. One of my high schools was being forced to adopt grades 7 and 8 into the high school, and I was very troubled by it because, as an outsider to education—I don't think there's ever a minister that's an expert, anyway, in education. I certainly wasn't in opposition, either. But there was something about a 12-year-old with a 16-year-old or an 18-year-old in a high school, and I was worried: "What about that? Surely parents must be concerned." All of the standard response that I had, I took to my local boards and said, "Why would you do this?" I was very concerned, and of

course I blamed you because this was your government and apparently it was your funding formula that was forcing this to happen.

Mr. Klees: Welcome to government.

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: Actually, it really was your funding formula because your government did develop it, but the reality is that despite the public meetings that I attended with parents as well, once it actually happened, all of the things that the parents were very concerned about didn't materialize and it actually turned out to be a very good experience. I had to step back and say, "Well, from principles and good education practices, maybe this is something that I'm simply not aware of."

I have had an opportunity on more than one occasion to chat with Emily Noble. This issue has not been raised with me, so I don't know how pressing it is.

Mr. Klees: Well, she won't like your response, I guess, at the end of the day, based on her letter.

1610

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: I guess I have to say that I anticipate working with her closely on evidence-based opportunities in education.

Mr. Klees: Okay. We'll move on to class size. Minister, we have a commitment to lower class sizes which it appears, depending on how you spin this, is taking place in some places in the province and not in others. I've had many calls and e-mails from parents relating to class sizes.

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: Primary class sizes?

Mr. Klees: Primary class sizes. Your former colleague was very good at selecting and cherry-picking certain schools. He'd go out—on a couple of occasions he had the Premier with him—and say, "Look how wonderful this is. We've got all these lower class sizes." But the e-mails that I get—and I know the minister got them, because I was copied on e-mails that were sent to the minister—say, "That's not the case in our school."

I wonder if you could table for us, then, the numbers of students that are in grades 4 to 8 classes and confirm for us that what is not happening is that because of pressure on school boards to cap their class sizes in grades K through 3, now the students in grades 4 through 8 aren't being penalized because of the space pressures that the schools are facing. So I'm trying to get a sense of just how effective this policy is and whether we're really overburdening those grades 4 through 8 as a result of this policy, which may not be working quite as well as we're being led to believe. If I could have your undertaking to provide us with those numbers, I would appreciate that.

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: I'm hoping very soon that you're going to have every single detailed classroom across Ontario on the JK to grade 3. On the grades 4 to 8, I will find out how quickly that material might be available to you. I'd like my deputy to jump in in just a moment—he may have more information—but we'll see if the data is actually available.

But our understanding is that in fact that's not the case, and it's likely because there's been so much capital money and money for new teachers going into the system

that it's not causing the effect that you're speaking of. Deputy, would you like to add to that?

Mr. Levin: Our view is that we've done very, very careful costing and analysis around the SK-to-3 class size commitment, including looking at every one of the 4,000 elementary schools in the province in terms of what their space requirements are and what they would need, and what every board would need, to get to the appropriate class sizes without increasing class sizes in 4 to 8. Our belief is that we are in the process of fully funding the costs of the additional teachers and the additional space that is required to fulfill the commitment on JK to 3. It is the case that there are 4,000 schools, and numbers vary from year to year and even within the year, so we certainly could not guarantee that there is not a single 4-to-8 class that has got bigger—I'm sure some have—because kids show up after September. But across the system as a whole, we have funded what we understand to be the full cost of JK to 3, and there should be no consistent average increases in grades 4 to 8.

Mr. Klees: Minister, I'd like to read to you from just one of those e-mails that I received in response to one of those announcements of the smaller class size. It's actually a copy of an e-mail that went to your predecessor and to the Premier. It reads:

"My son Benjamin has been in a classroom of over 20 children from the day he started senior kindergarten.... Based on some ridiculous formula that your ministry uses to determine teacher allocation, my son, who is seven years old and in grade 3, now finds himself in a classroom of 35 children (early French immersion, which is a difficult program) that can barely ease into their desks because the room is so badly overcrowded (there is barely one foot of space between the start of one row of desks and the end of the next)."

I have to read into the record this next line, which reads, "The situation wasn't this bad under the former Tory government."

Interjections.

Mr. Klees: I knew the minister would enjoy that and I knew you folks would enjoy that too. But there it is; it's in black and white.

Interjection.

Mr. Klees: No, as a matter of fact, it was written by Wendy Hillier. She is a parent who is very concerned about this situation.

Minister, I just ask you this. You must be familiar with these stories. This isn't an isolated case. You continue to say that you're making progress, and you have now, through Bill 78, created yourself some more latitude in terms of giving boards some more flexibility on this whole issue of capping class sizes, which is what we had told you from the very beginning: that a hard cap is unrealistic. Boards need the flexibility to account for in-year fluctuations, if you will; growth and so on. So what you're really doing is moving from a stated policy of a hard cap, which was your commitment and which we continue to hear, but really what Bill 78 is doing is allow-

ing you the flexibility to move away from the hard cap. Is that not true?

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: You asked a lot of questions in that little—

Mr. Klees: Well, just answer the last one, and that is, is it not true that through Bill 78 and the flexibility that you're giving school boards, which we always believed they should have, you are moving away from a stated policy of a hard cap on class sizes?

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: I think it's fair to say that so far, in two and a half years, we've moved from about 30% of the classes from JK to 3 being 20 or under to today, when 48% of those classes are 20 or under. That's how we're moving toward the goal.

As you know, I would have preferred the first term of our government to be about 10 years in a fixed term. Unfortunately, everyone else decided our next election would be October 2007, which is actually a shorter term; if you look at where we would be in a regular four-year term, it's actually beyond the 2007 timeline for the next election.

But we have said that we'll have 90% of all classes JK to 3 hitting that target, and that 10% has to be available if there are in-year changes. As you would know, there are students who move into classes mid-year and students who move away mid-year etc., so there will always be a little bit of flexibility.

I have to say that over the course of the first eight years under your government, I actually attended classes and sat with the primary school children on the radiator because there wasn't room in the classroom. They were terribly overcrowded. The woman who e-mailed you may well be in the other percentage of classes that still haven't gotten down far enough. But again, we're two and a half years in. We've moved from about 30% of the classes at that level and we're now at 48%, which is a huge jump.

We also recognize that it is an expensive proposition to meet that goal, because there are capital implications and there are teacher implications, both of which need to be funded and both of which have been continuously rolled out, to the tune of 2,000 new teachers and tens of millions of dollars in capital funding, because you need to support the boards in looking for the space to put more classes because each class has fewer children. So obviously it's a difficult policy to implement, but that doesn't mean it's not something we're going to work toward, and we are in fact implementing it. We just recognize that we've got to take the time to get the capital right, to get the number of classrooms required, to get the teachers hired, to get them whittled down to eventually having an absolute preponderance of classrooms from JK to 3 that are under the 20 cap.

Mr. Klees: But it is a change in policy.

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: It's not, in fact. The only thing that I was chagrined to hear was that our first fixed term of government until the next election is shorter than four years. As I say, I would have preferred a much longer first term.

Mr. Klees: Thank you, Minister. The reality is that Bill 78 provides all kinds of flexibility and is, in fact, regardless of how you try to position it, a shift from a hard cap.

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: That's actually not what the boards are feeling right now.

1620

The Chair: Thank you very much. Mr. Marchese, I'd like to recognize you now, please.

Mr. Marchese: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'm going to make some remarks and then I'll have specific questions for the minister.

For the record, yesterday the minister talked about the big picture quite a fair bit. What I want to tell her is that we're using the Dufferin-Peel Catholic District School Board problem as a microcosm of the larger picture. Through the questions we're asking, which flow from the investigator's report, we're saying to the minister and the Liberal government that we have generalized problems across the province. This report speaks to the large-picture problems, which speaks to the problem of special education funding, or lack thereof, speaks to the problem of ESL funding, or lack thereof, speaks to the problem of the liberal arts that the minister was so proud of talking about in terms of lack of music programs, lack of art programs, lack of librarians, the diminishing number of librarians under a Liberal government, a diminishing number of education assistants, a diminishing number of guidance teachers, a diminishing number of physical education teachers. The minister yesterday was so proud to talk about physical education. She may not be aware yet that they have a worse record than the previous government; that is, they talked about getting children to exercise for 20 minutes in the classroom. What she and the Liberal caucus members do not realize is that only 30% of school boards have physical education teachers.

We're spending very little on capital projects that the minister is so proud to talk about, and we'll get to that in some of our questions.

We're losing vice-principals and principals; we're losing caretakers.

All of these issues speak to the large picture. So when I make reference to the Dufferin-Peel Catholic District School Board and she makes light of it or small of it, we're talking about many, many issues, and the questions speak to that. I wanted to tell her that.

I also wanted to tell her that the calculators that I made reference to when I was talking about the EQAO tests—prior to when this government started doing its testing, they did not use calculators in the tests. The minister explained the use of calculators. We have no disagreement with the use of calculators. The problem is, previously they were not used, and now they are. What we are saying as New Democrats is that you are manipulating the results, and the use of calculators is yet one more little thing that is different from before that's making it possible for students to do better. We're not disputing that calculators are a useful tool. They could not have been used before and they now are, as one

element of the tools of manipulation that I mentioned yesterday, for the benefit of the minister, who spoke to that yesterday.

So I've got some questions. Yesterday I asked the minister about the investigator recommending firing vice-principals to achieve savings of \$2 million. I asked her how many vice-principals would have to be dismissed to achieve these savings, and the minister couldn't answer. I wonder whether the deputy minister knows the answer to that.

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: No; I suggested that we would get back to the members as quickly as we can with information.

Mr. Marchese: I see.

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: We do have some coming this afternoon, as I said, mid-committee.

The Chair: Excuse me. There was a direct question to the deputy. Deputy, are you able to answer that? Do you have the knowledge he's seeking?

Mr. Levin: I don't have in front of me the numbers.

Mr. Marchese: Okay, thank you.

I merely asked the deputy because the minister yesterday praised the deputy minister excessively, and I suspect appropriately. She talked of the deputy minister being widely recognized, very knowledgeable. I don't have the appropriate words, but I'm trying to express it in a way that compliments him and speaks to the fact that if he is full of such knowledge, as I suspect he is, and he is incapable of answering some of these questions, I worry about the minister and I worry about the deputy, for the record.

I asked, "Do you believe that vice-principals serve an important role in the school setting, or are they superfluous?" The minister couldn't answer that question. I wonder whether the deputy would respond to that.

Mr. Levin: I'm sorry? I was going back and thinking about the vice-principal question.

Mr. Marchese: Do you believe that vice-principals serve an important role in the school setting, or are they superfluous?

Mr. Levin: I think the accepted view, and my view, would be that they do serve an important role.

Mr. Marchese: I think so too.

Mr. Levin: I could say that the average salary for a vice-principal in Ontario, with benefits, is approximately 90-some thousand dollars, so you can do the mathematics to determine how many that would be.

Mr. Marchese: That's exactly what I was thinking in terms of the simplicity of answering the question. That's why I thought you could answer it. I even thought the minister could answer it. But that's what I'm getting at in terms of answers to questions. I think they're not complicated, if we want to answer them.

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: Without a calculator, though.

Mr. Marchese: Ah, Minister, you're so fond of calculators. You should bring it in so you can help me answer these questions.

Your investigators recommended firing custodians to achieve savings of \$2.6 million. Minister, do you think the boards should fire custodians?

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: I think I was being fairly clear during oral questions in the House that the investigators identified over \$20 million worth of savings where—I would hope that the member opposite is actually up to date, because the trustees had a meeting last night, and I hope they shared with you some of the comments that they made last night. Some of your questions may not actually be up to date now, so you may want to check—

The Chair: If I might interrupt, Minister, it's hard for Mr. Marchese to be up to date when we're not getting answers to questions. If you could assist us in that department, then we'd be in a better position.

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: I'm suggesting that he may want to check with the board that he is up to date on the questions that he's asking. The reality is—

Mr. Marchese: For the benefit of—

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: The reality is—

Mr. Marchese: I'm just asking questions.

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: Custodians, I think, are CUPE members, and in the system overall we've added over 3,500 CUPE members to the entire education system.

Mr. Marchese: I appreciate—

The Chair: I don't think that was the question, Minister.

Mr. Marchese: You can say what you like, but I'm asking very clear questions.

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: [*Inaudible*] no matter what party, wouldn't think that custodians are a significant and integral part of the school life. Having said that, the board needs to identify a number of areas that don't impact on student success and move forward towards a balanced budget.

Mr. Marchese: Thank you. Just for the benefit of the Liberal backbenchers who are here, the investigator has recommended 26 changes here. We read the report, right? I know how busy some of you are, and it's hard to read everything. The minister is proud of having read the report. She keeps making reference to the 20 recommendations. I am making reference, constantly, to the recommendations that the investigator makes in asking that the board consider making these cuts to achieve a balance with their budgets. These are the kinds of things the investigator has recommended the board do. These have serious impacts. So the question to the minister is, do you think the board should fire? She says, "We spent a whole lot of money." And then she says this investigator is making this recommendation and, presumably, the board will have to deal with it.

Do you think, Minister, custodians add to overall school safety?

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: I'm certain that this member needs to address the fact that this board in particular received \$100 million—

Mr. Marchese: I'll get to that, thank you.

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: —in new funding. You as a member couldn't possibly be supportive of having a deficit position—

Mr. Marchese: I will get to that, but what about the answer to the—

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: —given this board's considerable increase in funding.

Mr. Marchese: I will get to that.

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: I have said repeatedly—

Mr. Marchese: Okay, thank you, then.

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: —custodians are an integral part—

Mr. Marchese: You can't go on. If you're not answering my question, I'm sorry, you can't blah blah.

Interjection.

The Chair: Go right ahead.

Mr. Marchese: Sorry, Minister. When we're in this room, it is not for you to determine what correct questions are asked. Your Liberal backbenchers will ask you the correct questions you want to hear. It's not my role to give you what you want to hear.

The third recommendation of the education quality task force was that, "The Ministry of Education, in consultation with school boards and other members of the education community, develop mechanisms for annually reviewing and updating benchmarks in the funding formula." Can you tell me where the annual review is at?

1630

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: No, but I will try to get that for you.

Mr. Marchese: Does the deputy know?

The Chair: Deputy, do you have an answer?

Mr. Levin: I would prefer that we provide a full written explanation.

The Chair: You don't have the answer. Mr. Marchese?

Mr. Marchese: What new mechanisms are in place, based on the recommendations the task force made?

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: I would be in a better position had the estimates committee called education after the grants had been assigned for this year.

Mr. Marchese: You've got a deputy here who's very knowledgeable.

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: Actually, we're in the process right now of reviewing—

Mr. Marchese: Thank you.

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: —the grant formulas, so we don't have an answer.

Mr. Marchese: What happened to the standing committee on education promise during the election?

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: We're likely not through our first term, so we haven't enacted our entire platform, as this member knows, but we're certainly well on our way to establishing a significant amount of positive change in the education system.

Mr. Marchese: All I asked about was the specific recommendation you made with respect to establishing a standing committee on education.

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: I'm certain that by the time we get to the election, we'll have gone through a significant amount of platform items, and I know this member will be watching us.

Mr. Marchese: I'm not talking about other platform items; I'm talking about this promise. We don't have it yet.

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: I'm certain that by the time we get to the election, we'll be well on our way to having—

Mr. Marchese: I'm certain some of those promises might indeed be kept by the time you call the election.

Special education shortfalls: Your investigator's report states, "All school boards in Ontario are struggling to meet the ever increasing demands for special education services and many boards choose to supplement their special education allotments from other areas of their budget." Do you, Minister or Deputy Minister, think this is acceptable?

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: I think it's important to note that we've had a significant amount of increase in the area of special education and boards have had flexibility over the years. Frankly, one of the items I mentioned earlier in response to a question was that the ministry hasn't been involved in setting some of the standardized—

Mr. Marchese: Do you think it's acceptable?

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: I think our ministry has to be able to be in a position to have a set policy for boards to understand, what would we like to see, and is it in fact the right thing to see? Some boards use special-ed funding in different ways because they apply the programs in different ways.

Mr. Marchese: The question is based on the investigator saying, "Many boards choose to supplement their special education allotments from other areas of their budget." Do you think it's acceptable?

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: I do think that some boards spend more than other boards on special ed, so clearly they get it from other lines. So—

Mr. Marchese: Do you think that's acceptable?

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: —the question is moot, of course. I would think, in terms of my own practices or what I see in my own local board, they likely spend more than other boards do and they also feel that they need that flexibility—

Mr. Marchese: Thank you. I think I got an answer.

Your investigator's report on the Dufferin-Peel Catholic board shows that six out of eight GTA growth boards are spending beyond their allocations on special ed. Do you think those boards should make cuts to special education?

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: I think that we as a ministry should be taking a lead with our school boards in determining the best practices and programming for special education. I don't think, historically, that's the role the ministry has had, but we've certainly moved towards that in the establishment of the special education task force, which is now meeting and which has developed a report which they are now reviewing. I'm happy to see that. It moves to being able to say, "What is

the right amount? What is the right program? How much does that program cost?" That kind of standardization is important.

Mr. Marchese: Okay. Do you concede that it's possible that special education allocations to boards are inadequate? Is it possible?

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: I think it's important to note that some boards spend more because they choose to have more expensive programs. Some boards spend less because they apply a program in a different way. It's that kind of board flexibility that they want. On the other hand, I would like us to move to evidence-based programming, where the ministry plays a greater role in working with boards to develop what those programs should be.

Mr. Marchese: What does evidence-based programming vis-à-vis the provision of special ed mean?

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: I think what parents want to know in the end, at least all of the parents I've met in a number of years in this area—parents want the best program. If they were to call any one board today, no one could say with any certainty what is the best program. I think we need to get to that point.

Mr. Marchese: So the problem we are having in our system is that we don't really know what the best programs in special ed are: Is that your view?

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: That is my view.

Mr. Marchese: Interesting. Your investigator managed to produce this chart on page 8 of the report. You may have seen it. It shows that six out of eight GTA growth boards are underfunded with regard to special ed. It shows that they're underfunded with regard to special ed. It's the report that you read so thoroughly. Can we expand this for the whole province, Deputy Minister or Minister? The investigator managed to produce a chart which shows that six out of eight GTA growth boards are underfunded with regard to special ed. Can we expand this for the whole province?

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: None of the numbers that you're referencing right now is indicating in fact what you're saying. What you're saying is that they are spending more than we allot. That doesn't mean that they're spending too little or too much. What it means is that they spend the amount they get for special education and then on top of that they spend additional money from other areas on—

Mr. Marchese: So they're spending more. Does that mean it's probably a problem?

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: I think that again, back to the beginning, evidence-based programming is important. Parents ultimately want to know that the program their child is in is actually the best program, and I don't believe that we can say with any certainty that there is that level of standard in Ontario.

Mr. Marchese: How many boards have estimated spending for special education that exceeds the amount allocated?

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: I beg your pardon?

Mr. Marchese: How many boards have estimated spending for special education that exceeds the amount allocated? Does the deputy minister know?

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: We'll look and see if that info is available for you.

Mr. Marchese: Thank you.

Could the ministry staff please provide a table like the one in appendix G that I showed you, which lists the funds allocated for special education, the amount of money spent on special ed and the percentage difference between those two figures, for all the boards in the province in this school year and last year?

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: If that's easy to do, we'll probably do that fairly quickly. It may take a while if it's not readily available.

Mr. Marchese: Could I ask that, if it's taking a while, you might send me a letter to say, "It's taking a while"?

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: Sure.

Mr. Marchese: Thank you.

In 2005, the ministry set up a stakeholders' working table—they're usually active tables, I understand, rather than passive tables—on special ed co-chaired by Sheila Bennett and Kathleen Wynne. The chairs of the working table have already submitted a report to the minister. Could you table it for us?

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: The previous minister.

Mr. Marchese: The previous minister. But you have it, eh?

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: No, I won't be in a position to table that just yet, because the table itself is going to be seeing their report. They need to see it first.

Mr. Marchese: You've said that they're reviewing it. So they've seen it, they are reviewing it, but you want to wait for a final report before you send it to us? I see. Could I ask you: When that final report is done, is it possible to get that report from Madame Wynne?

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: It likely will be posted on the Web, so it's going to be publicly available as soon as that's in final form.

Mr. Marchese: Okay. For the record, the minister said it's likely to be posted on the Web. If it isn't posted on the Web, will you send me a note saying, "It won't be posted on the Web"?

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: In about 30 days I'm going to have an exact answer for you, so I promise you that.

Mr. Marchese: Thank you; we have that for the record.

Teacher salaries: Your investigators' report shows that without reallocating certain funds, certain areas would fall dramatically short. For example, the board spends \$27 million more than it is allocated for classroom teachers and preparation time. Why do you think this variance appears? Does the deputy know?

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: I think that—

Mr. Marchese: I can't hear you, Minister. Please help me; speak up.

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: I would say that this goes back to a long-standing problem with the salary benchmarks that are laid out in the technical paper. We can forward

that technical paper to you to look at the amounts that were allocated for salaries, but the reality is that in the case of Dufferin-Peel, like many others, the amount allocated has never been updated—

Mr. Marchese: Quite right; we're well aware of that, by the way. So was Dr. Rozanski.

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: You'll probably note as well that the administration of this board was significantly higher and grew significantly too, but unlike special ed, you probably wouldn't ask if that's considered overspending. That's why you need to go to all parts—

Mr. Marchese: I think so too. So this variance is probably common to all boards, would you say?

1640

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: You're using this board as an example, and that's why I say—

Mr. Marchese: No, no, this board—

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: You're talking about the Dufferin-Peel board right now?

Mr. Marchese: Yes. I'm just saying that—

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: If so, you know that as of last night's trustees' meeting with this board, their numbers have changed. That's why, whatever you're asking—

Mr. Marchese: I know that they have sat together with various groups to try to find ways to cut this thing; I know. They're trying to help you.

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: Actually, the first order—

Mr. Marchese: I'll get to the April 11—

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: You need to be factual.

Mr. Marchese: I know. I'll get to the April 11 letter that addresses some of these problems.

Can the minister name a single board where the money allocated for classroom teachers and prep time exceeds the money spent?

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: No.

Mr. Marchese: No, meaning you don't have it?

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: Right.

Mr. Marchese: Is it possible to get?

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: I can check and see if it's available to you.

Mr. Marchese: Okay.

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: Again, you need to be factual about the information that you present here.

Mr. Marchese: Yes, of course. Of course we need to be factual.

Could the ministry staff please provide a table like the list of funds allocated for classroom teachers, the amount of money spent on special ed and the percentage difference between those two figures for all the boards in this province for last year and this year?

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: I will let you know shortly what is easily available and, again, if it is made available easily, we'll have it to you in—

Mr. Marchese: And if it's complicated, you will let me know that it's complicated and you're working on it; is that it?

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: Right.

Mr. Marchese: That would be a month, two months, three months, if it's complicated?

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: I can't tell you that, but I know you've waited a lot longer in the past; I'm hoping to do better than that standard—

Mr. Marchese: Before next year's estimates, hopefully.

On page 23 of your investigator's report, it notes that salary benchmarks have not been properly updated since the formula was created in 1998. You're well aware of that. The salary gap currently sits at approximately 8.5% in the case of teachers, in this report. You do concede the existence of this gap, obviously.

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: I'd like my deputy to respond to this issue.

Mr. Levin: We do, of course, accept that the salary benchmarks, as they currently are, do not cover the full cost of salaries. However, boards get money for teacher salaries from a number of different places in the funding formula.

Mr. Marchese: Which are?

Mr. Levin: Many parts of the funding formula. The special education funding also provides money for teachers, the LOG allocation provides money for teachers, the ESL allocation provides money for teachers.

Mr. Marchese: Do you know, Deputy, that LOG is used constantly by the minister to say, "Boards can use this fund," and that fund has been overspent probably 100 times? Are you aware that that is used constantly to say, "Boards have flexibility and they could use this and this and this," and that's been overspent by millions and millions, in terms of its use to explain that they have various places to get that money? It's been overspent, over and over. Do you concede that?

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: No. The boards also are totally variant in what it is they need.

Mr. Marchese: I know that, too.

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: The individual contracts have their salaries at all kinds of various levels historically.

Mr. Marchese: I know that, too.

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: So the gaps are also extremely different in every board, and that's why the solutions for them—they insist on the flexibility of using different lines. So I don't know if you want to move to—

Mr. Marchese: I realize that. We'll come back to it. Thank you, Chair.

The Chair: I'd like to recognize Mr. Arthurs, please.

Mr. Wayne Arthurs (Pickering–Ajax–Uxbridge): Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for the opportunity. I can tell you, the members on this side are looking forward to our opportunity now to ask some questions. I certainly have one, perhaps with a couple of comments. I'm not going to use 20 minutes; I look forward to other members of our caucus having the opportunity. Mr. Zimmer, I think, is probably going to follow up, as the case might be.

Yesterday was rather interesting. I was most engaged, Minister, in your comments about the liberal arts activity we've undertaken, whether it's in music or in art or in phys ed, particularly with the number of teachers sitting around the table. I have an education background. I was one of those phys-ed-jock guys back when, and moved

from there into counselling because I wanted to engage kids in a very different way, in addition to in the gym, and see kids in a full and wholesome role in the schools. So I was most engaged in what you were saying and the enthusiasm you were expressing around that front.

As part of this quick story, when it comes to young people in particular—not the high school kids; the really little ones. My wife teaches. She's a grade 1 teacher; has been for some years now—taught a number of grades; but for the past, oh, I don't know, 10, 15 years probably, she's been teaching grade 1. One of her students was a young lady who became quite a good athlete. In fact, my wife was her first coach in grade 3. That young lady is Perdita Felicien, our world champion hurdler. It was that engagement with my wife that encouraged her to pursue the track initiatives that, in my view, to a large extent, led her in the direction she went. So I have a very special place in my heart and in our lives for the liberal arts kinds of activities, for the engagement of the youngest of folks in those kinds of things that aren't all in reading, writing and arithmetic, that engage them in those other things that round out their lives. Perdita has become a spokesperson, and will be a spokesperson, for young people of all cultures in this country, and will continue to do that. I just wanted to lead in, if I could, with that.

I'm particularly interested today, though, in your thoughts on our Learning to 18 strategy. Coming from the high school setting and having counselled kids for a number of years, it was so important to try to assist kids in finding what they would do if it was post-secondary education or, equally important, what they would do if they chose not to move on to a post-secondary environment. Often it was a choice at that point for many kids: "Your education is going to come to a conclusion. Your formal education is concluding; you have to make some job choices." These were children who were 14 and 15 and 16, who were faced with that kind of dilemma.

I believe that this strategy provides those children with some clear alternative options to be able to finish their formal education, albeit maybe not in the classroom, and to be able to leave the more formal education setting with a diploma in hand and with the skills necessary to either proceed through apprenticeships or the work environment or into other forms of post-secondary education. I'm very interested in your thoughts and your vision for these young people as they try to find their way toward finalizing their secondary education.

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: Thank you so much for your comments. I really appreciate your own history, which I wasn't aware of, other than you were a great civic leader in your own hometown. I didn't realize that you had an educational background as well. My own history of what kept me in school right through elementary and high school was, in fact, sports and extracurricular activities, hurdles included. Unfortunately, I didn't get as far as your wife's student.

I would like my deputy to speak to the student success strategy for our government, because I think it is one of the very exciting areas of change in our high school

system. In speaking to teachers individually, they are totally onside with what is happening in this area, and there are some very, very exciting things. Ben has had the opportunity, as well, to speak across Ontario on this initiative, so I'd like him to make some comments.

Mr. Levin: I could talk about this for a very long time, which I presume the members don't really want me to do.

I think the Learning to 18, the student success strategy in secondary education, is one of the most exciting and comprehensive approaches to secondary education reform that we've seen, frankly, anywhere in the world, because it covers multiple bases. One base of this is ensuring that we make changes so that kids don't get lost in large high schools, so that somebody knows who all the kids are. We know from research that a sense of connection in the school with an adult is a key factor in keeping kids in school. The provision of student success teachers and the reduction of class sizes in some key areas is an important part of that strategy. We'll be taking some further steps around helping teachers to improve pedagogy; to engage learners more effectively is another part of that.

A second piece, referring to the member's question on different routes: We know that young people take many different routes and that they change their minds. Students have plans in grade 11, but those are rarely the things they end up doing. I would venture that most of the people in this room are not doing what they thought they'd be doing when they were in grade 11. We need to give people multiple routes and flexibility, and that is another part of what we're proposing to do through the provision of dual credits, high-skill majors and external credits, through strengthening partnerships between high schools, employers and community agencies, which will allow schools to construct more flexible programs that engage students but actually lead to real outcomes and not dead-end outcomes, and that give students chances to change their minds, which is what happens to most of us as life goes on, and to move from one path to another.

I'll just make that very high-level, overview comment.

1650

Mr. Arthurs: I've got to tell you, if I had thought in grade 11 that I'd be doing what I'm doing today, I probably would have quit school.

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: What did you think you were doing, just to be curious? Oh, a jock; that's right.

Mr. Arthurs: When I was leaving high school, at that point I really didn't know. I knew I was going to pursue post-secondary phys ed, but it had a large amount to do with seeing kids in a holistic fashion. It wasn't because of the content. It was a window of opportunity to work with kids from early morning until late evenings and doing things with them that they wouldn't otherwise engage in.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Arthurs. Mr. McNeely?

Mr. Phil McNeely (Ottawa-Orléans): One thing I've been doing in the last year is getting into more schools. I'm always well received at the schools. I think that's because the changes have been showing up.

Teachers certainly are pleased with what's going on, and the kids seem to be quite happy.

Mr. Marchese: Phil, we can't hear you.

The Chair: Can you move forward?

Mr. McNeely: The last time I was in a school, the teacher was thanking me for the dollars that just came from the ministry for new books for the library, and that's so important to the kids. So I'm really pleased with that.

I have one specific question that relates to my area of Ottawa-Orléans, which is abutted on one side by Prescott-Russell-Glengarry and on the other by Ottawa-Vanier. Probably 50% of the population in those three ridings is franco-Ontarian, French. One of the things they are up against in their school boards is that they have longer distances to travel. When you compare the number of school boards in Ontario, we have 12 French school boards and 60 English school boards, so the geography is much different for the French school boards. Is this being taken into account when you are dealing with the French school boards? What assurances can you give the French-speaking people in my riding that they have access to an excellent public education?

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: Thank you. I wanted to have an opportunity to put on record some of the significant improvements in the French-language system that I know individuals are very happy to see: in particular, a \$205-million increase, which is a 27% increase. Enrolment in French-language education has actually decreased by just over 2%, so the funding per pupil is actually enhanced by more than 27%. Our previous Minister of Education, in my view, had a significant interest in this area, and I hope to continue that as well, so that we can determine exactly what it is that the French-language boards need in order to succeed and that those students in those programs should have the same level of expertise and quality as you would find in any board.

I think it's fair to say that, given the challenge in particular that 12 boards have in meeting the entire geography of Ontario, which is very different and calls on different techniques to be applied in terms of managing that kind of space—it calls on the kind of additional support that we come to the table with, and we're hearing very good reports in regard to that.

Just this past February we announced \$6.5 million to expand the courses that are being offered in French-language high schools. That speaks to parents understanding that if their kid is in that school, they're going to have the same level of choice that other students have. That was certainly a concern around the level of quality and availability in that program.

The permanent French-Language Education Task Force was also established, which is about addressing French-language education issues. I hope that community will see a significant commitment to getting to the solutions, not just once in a blue moon throwing some money at the problem, but actually organizing a systematic way to identify what the issues are and then finding a systematic way to address them too.

I think the other program, the Aménagement linguistique, as policy, requires each French-language school board and school authority to develop local policies to support our government's broader educational objectives and the unique challenges that face French-language education. So I know that there will be much more work to do in this area. I'm actually, this week, sitting down with representatives from all of these boards as well. As you know, in the first 15 days or so—the working days, I suppose, by now as the new minister—I wanted to meet with all of these significant groups, yesterday. All of them are coming up each day, and this is certainly a group that I'm anxious to sit down with. But I anticipate, Mr. McNeely, that you'll be helping me with this task.

Mr. McNeely: Thank you for that answer. Just from the point of view of the difficulties and the energy that's required by francophones to maintain their language and their culture, I was at an event with Minister Meilleur in Ottawa-Vanier last Friday, I believe. It was saluting five or six members from 12 schools as ambassadors for the Franco-Ontarian flag and for the French language and French culture. It's really great to see that dynamic in our community.

Statistics, I think, still show that there's attrition. As kids get older, they leave the system. What will your ministry be doing to make sure that French language education is strong and continues to be strong for Franco-Ontarians?

Hon. Ms. Papatello: I know that our minister responsible for French services, Madeleine Meilleur, is extremely tough, as you know, on all of the ministers in all of their portfolios to be certain that Ontario government services are provided in an appropriate manner for French speakers. In my last two and a half years, I've certainly suffered the wrath when we haven't been up to par, and we've had to get moving on that.

This area in education will be no different. Our history in the last two and a half years I think is very telling to people in the French system. There has been significant financial support, the likes of which these boards have never seen, because again, they were relatively new. So never in their history of being have they seen this level of support or these levels of increases. Moreover, I think what's more important and more telling than just the money is being systematic about how we're going to approach identifying what the priority issues are, how we maintain the stability of the French-language system and how we get at solutions and establish a group that is our go-to group, for example; not ad hoc but, rather, permanent. So you can see that we're anticipating having an ongoing dialogue and a relationship with them.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Wayne Arthurs): Mr. Zimmer, you have approximately two minutes.

Mr. David Zimmer (Willowdale): That's all?

The Acting Chair: That's it.

Mr. Zimmer: Then I'll go to my short question. I'm a Toronto MPP. I represent a Toronto riding. As you know, violence in schools is a huge issue in the province, but it's particularly an issue in Toronto. What are your

thoughts and plans and ambitions to deal with that problem?

Hon. Ms. Papatello: In two minutes? I know that a lot of our colleagues actually have been charged with participating in the solution, in particular for Toronto. But as other ministers have recognized, the issue isn't just Toronto. We need to be certain that we are leaving other parts of Ontario in as part of the solution, in particular around our safe schools.

The former minister made significant inroads to provide, I believe, over \$3 million in the area of technology and equipment for schools physically to make the physical improvements required on school property. That happened last year, which I believe was very well received. In addition, I know that we are going through those safe school audits, and I'm hearing some pretty great stories of local boards engaging with their local police services groups to do those kinds of safe school audits, bringing in experts at the local level to say, "Are we doing everything we can to make our environment safe?"

In this coming week, ideally during Education Week, we're going to have much more to say about taking more steps forward for safe schools. I think that's what every parent wants.

Mr. Zimmer: I look forward to that. Thank you.

The Acting Chair: You have approximately a minute left at this point.

Mr. Zimmer: I'll graciously yield it to the opposition.

The Acting Chair: In that case, we'll turn to the official opposition. Mr. Wilson.

1700

Mr. Jim Wilson (Simcoe-Grey): Thank you. Minister, I want to read into the record a couple of letters from constituents and ask you to get back to me, if you don't mind. I'll provide you with copies of the presentations they've made to me.

The first one deals with a school in my riding. It's St. Paul's elementary school in Alliston. It's the school where I went to grade school and where my mother taught for over 30 years. A parents' group, for the last year, has been trying to have the school rebuilt. There's quite an extensive PowerPoint presentation, which I'll provide in hard copy to you. They've been working with the school board. The school board hasn't quite decided yet whether this school is deemed to be on their prohibitive-to-repair list, but maybe that's something that your ministry could work with the school board on.

The first letter is from Tuesday, April 25, 2006:

"Dear Mr. Wilson:

"The parents of St. Paul's school raised many issues in 2004/05 school year, regarding safety, cleanliness, and state of repair of the school.

"The condition assessment completed by the provincial government in 2003, on St. Paul's elementary school, identified the school required over \$1.8 million in repairs. Apparently, in May 2005, the Simcoe Muskoka Catholic District School Board approached the Ministry of Education with the intention of having the school

deemed prohibitive to repair (PTR), as they believe St. Paul's school requires \$2.28 million in repairs, 84% of the school replacement cost. A response from the Ministry of Education was anticipated in the fall of 2005. To this date, no response has been given to the school community regarding the PTR.

"Recently you received pictures of the conditions that existed at that time. Although some of the conditions have made steps towards improvement, the majority of the concerns raised still exist today.

"Concerns regarding poor air quality were confirmed in May 2005 by an air quality specialist hired by the board. Hoppers were installed in an attempt to improve the air flow. Upon receiving the poor air quality results last year, the parents offered to purchase equipment that may improve the air quality. This request was denied.

"In March 2006, the school community asked to have the air quality tested again. The results of this test confirmed the hoppers made no difference in the air flow and the air quality continues to lack the adequate air needed to conform to standards set 45 years ago.

"Earlier this month, the board and the air quality specialist were asked what could be done to correct the ongoing and immediate health concerns for the children and staff at St. Paul's school. The air quality specialist suggested installing a unit ventilator in the exterior of each classroom. The board confirmed to the school community, the central boiler and electrical system cannot accommodate any additional usage. Once again the children are being kept at risk.

"As parents we have entrusted the school board and the provincial government with the safety and well-being of our children. Help us to surround them with the respect and dignity they deserve. Time is of the essence as the condition of the school continues to worsen.

"We have faxed to you documents sent home to the families through the school in April and May of 2005. We are also enclosing a response letter sent to Michael O'Keefe, director of education for Simcoe Muskoka Catholic District School Board, dated June 2005.

"We believe the health of the children is being affected. Our priority is for the children at St. Paul's school to learn in a safe and clean environment, this has been 'deferred' for far too long. Will you help us to protect the children?"

That's signed by Milva Biffis and Janet Murphy of the concerned parents' committee.

Minister, I don't expect you to give me an answer today, but if you could undertake to contact that school board. Michael O'Keefe and I have been trying to contact each other for the past few days, but either I'm in meetings or he's in meetings. He's the director.

I can vouch first-hand that the school stinks. It's in terrible disrepair. I don't know how it got missed in the upgrades that have been done. They're certainly looking for a replacement school.

I don't know if you want to comment now, Minister, on that, or do you want me to go on to the next letter, which is a different issue?

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: We have a number of issues across Ontario that are pending, if you will. I'm happy to receive the package, including the PowerPoint, and to review the case of your own elementary school, actually, I understand you said. I appreciate that. Thank you.

Mr. Wilson: Thank you. The next issue has to do with some constituents who came to see me who home-school their children. I must admit, the points they brought up concerning Bill 52, the Education Statute Law Amendment Act (Learning to Age 18), 2005—I just wonder if the government has addressed this and what the answer is to the parents. I'll just read their letter. It's from Mr. and Mrs. Michael Kidd of RR 1, Ravenna, Ontario—where George Smitherman's mother lives, by the way—and it's dated February 20, 2006.

"Dear Mr. Wilson:

"We are writing to review the positive aspects of home-schooling and discuss the negative aspects which Bill 52 will have on home-schooling.

"Our family has been home-schooling in Ontario for the last 20 years along with many other families in our county. We have graduated four sons, who are all happily employed or in post-secondary education. Home-schooling has been a very positive experience for our family. The children have grown up to be responsible, confident, hard-working, but most importantly having integrity making them an asset to our community. They have well-rounded skills, and are motivated to contribute to society. We have included articles and studies which will confirm our experience is widespread among home-school families.

"We are concerned about Bill 52, and its negative impact on home-schooling families.

"Raising the age of compulsory education to 18 would restrict home-school freedoms. We would have two more years to justify to the government re our education plans for our children. Often home-school children graduate early, or they have employment opportunities as part of their education. Fining employers, or parents for children under 18 that are employed would be detrimental to the children's whole education.

"Keeping back the ability to get a licence"—referring to a driver's licence—"would also cause difficulty for our students who need to drive to work situations, or learning opportunities. We suggest that there should be no ties between Ministry of Transportation and Ministry of Education. Should you refuse to [do] this then a letter from a parent that states that the child is home-schooled should be sufficient to allow them to get their licence.

"We have asked for an interview with you and hope to be able to discuss this with you ASAP. Thank you for taking the time to think through this issue and represent the home-school families in this area in the Legislature. Please feel free to give us a call or e-mail...."

Anyway, I did meet with them shortly after receiving this letter from Michael and Marilee Kidd. I can provide you with a copy of the letter. I did tell them that there would be some opportunity probably this month to bring this to your attention and ask for a response.

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: Thanks. I'm happy as well to table a response to the family that has written. I think we need to make it clear that the legislation's intent, and as it's written, speaks to learning to 18 or graduation. So there will be many instances in the public school system and in home-schooling—obviously, most children are in public education, and they're graduating before age 18. That is also often the case with home-schooling. So when they're graduating and they're 16 or 17, then clearly this doesn't apply. The bill is actually intended for those who are 18 and who haven't yet graduated.

These instances that you're speaking of and that this woman has written to you about clearly wouldn't apply, because her own children, as she's identified, are not 18 and they've already graduated.

Mr. Wilson: Is that clear in the legislation, and is the home-school association aware of that, because they alluded to the—

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: Yes. Just because I've not seen that correspondence but I'm clearly likely going to, I will endeavour to get the information to the writer, as well as to the association.

Mr. Wilson: Thank you.

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: Chair, just before you move on, do you want these tabled at any time? There are three answers to—

The Chair: As soon as you have them, that would be great. The clerk will relieve you of those.

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: Yes. We have three. I'm just wondering if there is a points system here at this committee. There clearly must be points for getting answers next day for this committee.

Mr. John Wilkinson (Perth-Middlesex): No brownie points.

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: No Brownie points? Somehow I don't think this particular Chair is going to be interested in giving me Brownie points.

The Chair: You're definitely not a Boy Scout, Minister.

Okay, Mr. Klees.

Mr. Klees: Minister, Mr. Marchese was following a line of questioning with you on the Dufferin-Peel board's review and, I think rightfully so, was challenging you or your ministry in terms of what the expectations are for the board, particularly in light of your comment in the House the other day that you would not preside over any cuts to services in education, that that was not your intention and isn't something you would support, and yet, of course, that entire report is really nothing but cuts to services.

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The Toronto District School Board was in very similar circumstances, and there was a review. Inspectors were assigned to the board, did their assessment and made some very specific recommendations—really not very different from the kinds of recommendations that are being made to the Dufferin-Peel board. Yet the Toronto board wasn't dealt with in the same way that it seems you intend to deal with the Dufferin-Peel board. In fact, a

significant amount of money was transferred to the Toronto board to help them out of their deficit.

I have two questions for you: First, what was the amount of money that was transferred by the ministry to solve the deficit problem in the Toronto board, and second, why would you be dealing so differently with the Toronto board and the Dufferin-Peel board?

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: I will take that question and endeavour to get you an answer on the transfer regarding the financial information. Some of the background and reasons were clearly before my being in this position, but I will try to get you some of that information. I will tell you that the supervisor your government appointed, in the end, brought a number of spending behaviours to the board that caused even more problems. Some people are viewing it as because of the supervisor you put in place in the Toronto board.

As I mentioned to the other member, I will tell you that as of last evening the trustees of the Dufferin-Peel Catholic board have agreed with us that our number one action at this time is to actually determine what the deficit is, because neither we—the ministry—nor the trustees are able to say exactly what the number is, and the number has changed. So until we have the number, trustees, rightly so, are loath to say, "Are we going to look at all 20 recommendations the investigators made? Clearly, we don't need to find \$20 million or \$22 million." The number has changed again by about \$7 million in the past week.

I'm very happy to say that both the chair of the board and I have agreed that we have significant work to do and we're planning on doing that together. Historically, in the days when your Conservative government called a supervisor in to the Toronto board, most Ontario boards were in deficit. That whole scenario has changed. That is simply not the case today, and it's largely because, as you know, the estimates are showing an increase of about \$2 billion, the lion's share of which is going to school boards. So the financial position is altogether different today.

Mr. Klees: Minister, in the final analysis, the point I'm making here, and I think you have to agree, is that the process of review that was applied to Toronto—namely, a third party independent review that identified certain concerns and made certain recommendations—was exactly the same process as your government has entered into now. I look forward to hearing your response in terms of the amount of money that was then transferred by the ministry to the Toronto board to help them with their deficit problem. It will be interesting, for the record, to see what that is and how you conduct yourself with the Dufferin-Peel board.

I want to move on to specifics, and I'll use the Toronto board as an example. We have some very specific numbers relating to the Toronto board as it relates, first of all, to this funding gap for a number of areas, and I want to review all of those with you. I think it may help you as well, in your induction into the ministry.

First of all, it talks about the difference between the commitment as a result of the contracts that have been committed to for teachers' salaries and benefits, and the amount of funding that is available through the ministry. You like to refer to the previous government as having created all this, and that somehow all is well since you've come on board or since the Liberal government took over the reins. The actual numbers for the Toronto school board—by the way, this is consistent across the board as well—are that actually the funding gap has increased significantly over that period of time. You're shaking your head. Well, I have the numbers here, Minister, and I look forward to hearing from your ministry as to why the Toronto school board numbers differ from yours. They show that for 2002-03, the gap for salaries for elementary teachers was 6.7%. In 2003-04, it went up to 8%; for 2004-05, the gap is 9%. Projecting forward, it is in the range of 9%. So, really, you have an increase of 3% in the actual gap from the time your predecessor—I won't blame you for this—had responsibility as Minister of Education. You have appeals from the Toronto school board to address this issue.

I'm simply going to ask you, in light of the fact that your government is responsible for this increasing gap—

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: That's not the case.

Mr. Klees: You say it's not the case, Minister, and I would ask you then to please provide me, through your ministry, with a written response to prove these numbers wrong. I'll table them with you. Specifically, I want comment in terms of the increased gap in funding over the years that you are now disputing. I'm surprised that you would do that. You've only been in your chair for a few days and yet somehow you can say with all certainty that these numbers that are prepared by the financial department of the Toronto school board are wrong. So, I'll be very interested. I think—

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: I appreciate the opportunity to address this for you, and I'm happy to receive that information as well, so we can do some comparative reviews. The reality across the province is that per pupil funding has increased by 17%. We have 40,000 fewer students in Ontario, but we have \$2 billion more in the system. Unlike your government—

Mr. Klees: Minister, that bafflegab doesn't help the Toronto school boards.

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: But those are facts.

Mr. Klees: That isn't the issue we're dealing with.

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: Those are facts of funding that you need to understand as well.

Mr. Klees: We're not dealing with how much more money is in the system.

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: Absolutely we are.

Mr. Klees: I am dealing with the funding—

Interjection.

Mr. Klees: Excuse me, Chair. Mr. Wilkinson—

The Chair: Someday you might be the Chair, but today you're not. I don't need any additional help here. This is challenging enough. Thank you.

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: I'll speak specifically—

Mr. Klees: If I might just finish, Chair, the reality is that Mr. Wilkinson has no business carping into this discussion, and he should know that.

To the minister: I look forward to the explanation regarding the increase in the funding gap. I want to—

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: May I just address part of that for you? For the Toronto board, what we have—

Mr. Klees: No, I've heard enough, and you'll get back to me.

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: Well, you asked me the question. You have to allow me the time to answer the question.

Mr. Klees: But you said you have to get back to me.

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: No, I don't. What I need to tell you—

The Chair: Minister—

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: I need to put something on the record in response, Chair.

The Chair: You'll have an opportunity to do that. He asked you a specific question. You said you weren't able to respond. He now has asked—

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: He asked me several questions, actually.

The Chair: Fair enough.

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: I have not had an opportunity to respond.

The Chair: When he yields the floor to you with his next question, you can briefly respond.

Mr. Klees: I'd like to move on to another area where there is a significant problem.

The Chair: One minute.

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Mr. Klees: Seeing as there's only one minute, I'll take the opportunity in my next round to discuss with you a number of other areas specifically relating to the Toronto school board but, from my discussions with trustees from school boards across the province, this is not unique to Toronto. We will not accept a response that simply states that there are an additional so many millions of dollars in the system. That isn't what is creating a deficit. What created the deficits were the additional commitments that your government made in terms of funding of programs and contracts without the sufficient funding for it. You made spending commitments, but your predecessor failed to deliver the funding, and that's why many school boards are in a deficit situation today, and we'll see, in the next fiscal year, many more. That's what we'll deal with, and I look forward to your specific responses to my specific questions in the next round.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Klees.

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: Chair, am I in a position—

The Chair: I've already stated that you indicated you're going to get back and respond to the material.

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: But he's tabling additional questions that I should have the opportunity to answer and put on the record.

The Chair: We have run out of time, and I will recognize Mr. Bisson.

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: What is the format, then? Does the minister get to answer the questions, or do they just have the ability to put them to the table? I just need to know.

The Chair: The format was very clear if you were paying attention.

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: Perhaps you could explain it to me. I need to know your format. Seriously, when do I—

The Chair: Will you cut her off?

What I explained—

Interjection.

The Chair: If you need a more detailed explanation—and if you'll listen, I'll explain one more time. Each political party gets 20 minutes. That 20 minutes is now over for Mr. Klees. I don't think it's appropriate that I start taking time away from the Liberal rotation because of the timing—

Interjection.

The Chair: No. If both of you can shorten your questions and you can get it into shorter answers, then we can work. My job is to move forward, and I'm now recognizing Mr. Bisson.

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: My intention is simply to have answers.

The Chair: I'll draw you a diagram.

M. Gilles Bisson (Timmins–Baie James): Merci—
Interjection.

M. Bisson: Madame la ministre, j'ai des questions.

Mr. Marchese: Mr. Chair, if I can, the questions—
Interjection.

Mr. Marchese: Minister, you're talking, and you've got to listen, right? You can either respond to his questions on the next round when we get to the Tories or take some of the Liberal time to answer that question. So you have an opportunity, either in response when you've got the Liberal time or when we get to the Tories. Okay?

Mr. Bisson: Not on my time.

The Chair: Mr. Bisson, you have the floor.

M. Bisson: Merci, monsieur le Président.

Madame la ministre, bonjour. Comment ça va? J'ai des questions spécifiquement—vous comprenez le français, hein? I'm not sure. Comprenez-vous le français? Je peux faire ça en français ou—

L'hon. M^{me} Pupatello: Je peux comprendre tout le français, mais je pense que ce n'est pas assez suffisant pour faire une bonne réponse en français, parce que la demande est très spécifique.

M. Bisson: Mais je suis un francophone. J'aimerais faire mes questions en français.

L'hon. M^{me} Pupatello: Excusez-moi. Je pense aussi que mon député peut parler un peu de français, oui?

Mr. Levin: Une espèce de français.

Mr. Bisson: Une espèce. Okay, I'm going to do an espèce of English. How's that? Just for the committee—

The Chair: Mr. Bisson, if I may, if you require translation services for the benefit of all members, we can make that arrangement.

Mr. Bisson: No, I realize that.

The Chair: I just want to explain the process—

Mr. Bisson: I understand the process.

The Chair:—because apparently people are not clear on how we do estimates.

Mr. Bisson: I'm very clear. I've been doing estimates for 16 years. My question is, how much time is left in these estimates?

The Chair: Just under six hours.

Mr. Bisson: So I can arrange for French translation? At the next estimates, I can do this in French?

The Chair: If you give the Chair sufficient notice, the clerk and I will ensure that we can move back to the Amethyst Room, and then all members will be able to stay current with you. That's all I wanted to put on the record. You have the right to proceed if you wish, but you're aware of the minor complications that creates for people.

Mr. Bisson: I would ask that the next time the committee meets, we provide for translation services and I'll do this in French.

Mr. Marchese: He'll ask his questions next week.

The Chair: Just give me two seconds.

Okay. We are in room 151. We will ensure that you have French-language services next Tuesday; we'll accommodate that. That's taken care of.

Mr. Bisson: Merci, monsieur le Président.

Mr. Marchese: I was interested in Mr. Arthurs's remarks—he is a former physical education teacher—that he supports holistic education, which obviously would include physical ed. I wonder whether the minister can give us figures, because she talks about the liberal arts in a way that she was so proud of. I would be interested to know if the minister and the deputy can provide figures about how holistic we are in our education system.

Minister, could you give us figures from since you came into power on music programs and how much by way of music teachers and programs we now have in the system as a result of all of the billions of dollars you poured in? For music, for art—because you've poured so many billions of dollars in and you're so proud of the liberal arts, it would be good if you can give me the figures. I'm assuming Mr. Arthurs, as a former physical education teacher, would think that librarians are a key part of that liberal arts development; it's certainly part of the literacy development, as a former teacher. So could you provide us with how many more librarians we have under your government where you've poured in billions of dollars more than the previous government? Could you also provide us with how many more physical education teachers we have under your government than the previous government? I like Wayne Arthurs's talk about a holistic approach to education, and I'm so excited with the minister talking about the liberal arts. Could we get those figures?

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: As a matter of fact, I can tell you now that there's a \$139-million investment and 2,000 specialist teachers who have been hired at the elementary school level for phys ed, music and art, and we are having a tremendous response from our teachers.

Mr. Marchese: Great. Could we—

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: The numbers are quite staggering and the investment is absolutely historic.

Mr. Marchese: That's great. That is so, so good. If you could provide us the figures for school boards, even with a little chart, of how many more teachers we have in music, art, librarians, physical education teachers and even guidance teachers. Could you do that for me?

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: I'll find out when you might be able to get such information if it's available and easily accessible.

Mr. Marchese: And if it's complex, could you let me know in a month or so that it's complex and you require more time to let me know?

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: Perhaps, yes.

Mr. Marchese: "Perhaps" means you're upset today, so it might not happen?

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: No. You've asked many, many questions today, and we endeavour to get all of the information to you.

Mr. Marchese: It's just that you spoke so brilliantly today about the liberal arts—

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: It was yesterday.

Mr. Marchese: —and I was so pleased that Wayne Arthurs was so supportive of that. I want to know that the evidence shows that, because you poured in so many billions.

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: Not billions; \$139 million.

Mr. Marchese: No, but in terms of education in general, billions, I think.

I hope, Deputy Minister, you can help us out as well in this regard as best as you possibly can.

There was another question that I wanted to ask you. The Dufferin-Peel Catholic district board wrote you a letter on April 11, and it says, "With respect to the balance of the report's recommendations, the board is perplexed as to why the ministry's investigators would recommend cutting services and redirecting dedicated funds at the same time that they recommend increased provincial funding." Could you respond to that?

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: This board in particular received \$100 million, which is a 19% increase in funding, and had a 3%, if that, increase in enrolment. They have had some increases in administration, some of which they have justified to us; they feel justified in those increases. Overall, I think it's important that you check with that local trustee board to find out their new numbers, because their numbers have changed.

1730

Mr. Marchese: Okay. So what you're saying is that you've given an extra \$100 million. You admit, in the one or two articles that I have read on April 24, that there's some shortfall in funding as it relates to what the Conservative government did or did not do, but you then say, "But they received \$100 million." So there are shortfalls in funding, but because they received more, too bad, so sad; they just have to find a way to make it so that their budget is balanced. Is that more or less what I understand you to be saying?

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: No, that's not it at all. What we are saying is not just to this board but to all boards: We anticipate that their funding—and we have funded all of our initiatives. In the area of salary, for example—the previous member asked a question around the gap. As this member would know and you would know, we've actually made allowances for an increase according to the four-year contracts, which are 2%, 2%, 2.5% and 3%, reflected in the funding models for that board—

Mr. Marchese: Chair, she's not answering my question, so it's not very helpful.

The Chair: When you ask a specific question about numbers and we don't get an answer, that's the end of it. If you're asking the minister her opinion on something—not this question; the one prior to that; you asked her to comment—I have to let the minister have reasonable time to comment.

Mr. Marchese: Even if she doesn't answer the question?

The Chair: I'm not here to determine the quality of the answers; I'm here to ensure the quality of the discussion. I want to make sure: If you're going to ask a specific question, I will cut the respondent off if they're not answering on the subject matter as well. But the minister was still answering the question, and I'll give her a reasonable amount of time to do that.

Mr. Marchese: So if I say that I'm satisfied, you move on?

The Chair: If it doesn't appear to be rude. If you're satisfied, then we can proceed.

Mr. Marchese: Thank you, Minister. Your own investigator recommends that the minister move, as quickly as government resources allow, to narrow the salary gap for existing staff. The investigator says, "as quickly as possible." Do you intend to move on that recommendation? If so, when might you do it?

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: As I said earlier, if we had had this estimates committee meeting after the grants had been established for 2006-07, all of us would be in a better position to address the numbers, but the reality is that the budget timing this year was different. I did acknowledge for the board, as they have already heard, that, over the next three years, we have already committed to increases of 2%, 2%, 2.5% and 3%, just in the area of salary—

Mr. Marchese: I'm asking a very specific question, Minister.

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: —but that specifically means that that gap is not growing in the area of salary because we have come forward with the funding to mitigate that. This board is aware of that, as all the boards are.

Mr. Marchese: So this investigator, someone you know very well, makes a specific recommendation, and all you can say is that you're putting in 2% a year and that's dealing with that gap?

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: No, it's 2.5% and 3%, and it's very important.

Mr. Marchese: So even though your investigator knows this and he's making a different recommendation,

what you're saying is, "That's what we're doing and that should satisfy that."

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: No, I've not said that. That's misquoting me. I've never said that; that is not at all what I've said. What I've said is that the previous minister has already made information available to this board and all others that, at a minimum, we've come forward with 2%, 2%, 2.5% and 3%.

Mr. Marchese: Thank you. I'm satisfied with the answer. It's unbelievable how ministers—I think that's why you've been appointed in this ministry: to not answer questions.

In his 2002 report, Dr. Mordechai Rozanski singled out this gap as a major problem and recommended that the government act. Are you conceding that you haven't fulfilled this recommendation?

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: I will say specifically that in many instances, we've actually gone far beyond what Rozanski has identified, especially in the area of funding, so we're quite proud of our record.

Mr. Marchese: Could the ministry staff please provide a status report on the implementation of the 2002 education task force, the Rozanski recommendations?

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: I will endeavour to see if that might be available to this member.

Mr. Marchese: "If it might be available"—? I didn't hear the other words.

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: To this member.

Mr. Marchese: If it might be available. I see. "Might be available" to the extent that maybe it's done, and you have to consider whether it's available, whether they can do it or whether my request is not able to be agreed to? What are you saying?

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: If it's available and easily accessible, I'm happy to provide it to this member. But I think this member also appreciates that if you're asking for something that at first blush may or may not be a significant amount of work—I'd like to get back to the member to tell him it's actually possible. I think that's a fair request of a minister who's been in the chair for 15 days. If it's easy to get for you, I'm happy to do it.

Mr. Marchese: "If it's easy to get for you." So could I please understand? You're saying, "If this takes too long, I might not be able to give it to you." Is that what you're saying?

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: Well, the experience you've had so far in calling this ministry to this committee tells me that I won't have to work too hard to improve the standard that you're used to at this point. So I think I'm going to do my best. As you might have learned, some of the questions that you tabled yesterday have now been responded to in writing, and you've already received them.

Mr. Marchese: So could you provide a status report on the implementation of the 2002 education task force?

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: If it's available, it's readily available, it's easy to find that information for you.

Mr. Marchese: What does that mean, "If it's available"?

The Chair: Cut all the mikes, please.

I want to put it on the record that the rules for order paper questions are the same rules that apply to this committee except for time: They're required. I don't want you to labour with this discussion; I'll give you the extra time, Mr. Marchese.

The expectation of the ministry is that it is required to respond like an order paper question. You never get an order paper answer saying, "We could do the information but we don't have it currently in a report." They're required to do that. So the ministry is required to answer your questions to the best of its ability. I just wanted to clarify that for the minister. And you seem to be inquiring about, if the report doesn't exist, you won't be able to get an assessment of it. The ministry's still required to give you that assessment.

I'll give you back the floor, but I want to put that on the record for everybody, and hopefully that clarification—and leave it up to us, the staff and the Chair, to ensure that those are brought forward in a timely manner. You have the floor.

Mr. Marchese: Mr. Chair, you and I are aware of the rules, and I'm questioning the minister in terms of "if it is available." So I'd like her, for the record, to keep on saying that, because it's just part of the politics. But I am expecting that the deputy, who knows the rules, will answer the request that we're making.

Your ministry has announced benchmarks through 2008, and these benchmarks leave a gap. Could we conclude that you don't intend to remedy this gap within your mandate?

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: I think it's fair to put on the record that, in the eight years I spent in opposition, at estimates the ministers actually participated in the committee for the half-hour they spoke and then they didn't attend the committee meetings whatsoever. That was almost always the case—

Mr. Marchese: Sorry, sorry—

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: I think Minister Wilson was an exception.

Mr. Marchese: Sorry—what question is she answering, Mr. Chair?

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: I think it's fair to say that we've been quite—

The Chair: First of all, Minister, that is not factually correct. If you'd just respond to the question. If you'd like a history of what has happened in estimates, we'll provide you with one, but at the moment—

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: I think it's fair to say that this government has been extremely accountable and open, and has certainly changed the rules to allow for accessibility by members of our own caucus and the other two caucuses as well. That has been the standard here at this estimates committee. I think it's important to put that on the record.

Mr. Marchese: Thank you. Madam Minister, I really would urge you to put the BlackBerry down and pay attention to the questions; I really do. I'm not sure what you're looking at, but I really think you should be

respectful of us. We're asking you questions. You're looking at your BlackBerry. You're not answering the questions, or you're not understanding them, and I find it offensive. Could you put the BlackBerry down?

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: I am endeavouring to get you answers to some of your questions.

Mr. Marchese: You've got a deputy minister, and Ms. Naylor is here, who should—

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: We can spend your 20 minutes giving me a lecture about behaviour at committee, but I don't think you've got quite the track record to be doing that. I'm happy to sit here, for the length of time it is, to answer whatever question you would like.

Mr. Marchese: You are here to answer questions from us and your Liberal members. That's your duty. You should remember that.

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: I'm happy to do that, and I think you should put questions that allow me to answer the questions as well. I'm happy to do that.

Mr. Marchese: My questions are very clear, and you haven't answered one clearly.

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: We have. In fact, we tabled answers to questions you tabled yesterday and gave it to you in writing this afternoon.

Mr. Marchese: So we will get answers to the questions you're not able to answer, and I'm very pleased. Do you think—

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: We gave it to you by the next day. You did appreciate that? Did you?

Mr. Marchese: It's very nice. We're happy to get answers that you can reflect on, that your staff can reflect on, that you can all agree on, and it's nice to have it the next day, if we can't get it today.

1740

The Chair: One minute, Mr. Marchese.

Mr. Marchese: Do you think all boards should use their special-purpose grants, such as the ESL grant, to cover this systemic shortfall?

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: I believe it's important to put on the record that all the school boards that watched very closely the negotiations happening with the teachers' federations that landed four-year contracts, something your own government never saw and the previous government never saw—those in fact also came with a 2% increase in funding from the government—

Mr. Marchese: Sorry; what's the answer to the question?

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: There is no consistent or systematic—

Mr. Marchese: What do you think? What's your opinion about that?

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: The only thing that is systematic is increases. That's the reality. They have received more money for salaries each year. The contract is 2%, 2%, 2.5%, 3%.

Mr. Marchese: Right, but my question is, should they use their special—

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: I have to finish my answer.

The Chair: Mr. Marchese, you asked the minister her opinion, and I have to give her time to answer. You didn't ask a specific, factual question. You asked her opinion. So I'm going to give—

Mr. Marchese: Mr. Chair—

The Chair: Mr. Marchese, you're not even on the record at the moment. You can table it, you can read it, you can do what you want, but I'm going to let the minister finish the answer, and then I'm going to recognize Mr. Zimmer, because your time is just about up. Minister?

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: There is no systematic growth of any gap, because when the four-year contracts were signed, the government in fact came forward and committed and has already delivered on increases just in the area of salaries, which quite frankly not only are the boards very happy with, but so are the federations. I think it's fair to say that for the first time we have peace and stability in our schools. Our parents love it, the kids love it, the teachers love it, the boards love it. I appreciate that you want to characterize things as extremely difficult, but the reality is that there is a tremendous amount of goodwill in education.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister. Mr. Zimmer, and then Mr. Ramal.

Mr. Zimmer: Minister, you just left Community and Social Services, and I expect that every minister, when they arrive in a new ministry, perhaps does a thought experiment and projects themselves ahead in time, maybe a year or two or three years or whatever, and probably thinks about what they would like to leave behind as a legacy when they leave the ministry or when their time in the ministry is behind them. As you start in this new ministry, picking up where Minister Kennedy left off, what would you like your legacy in the ministry to be, thinking ahead a couple of years?

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: I haven't had the opportunity yet to do some long-term planning of my own, because the change was nothing I had expected or anticipated. I will tell you that in all my years of government, the things I was hoping to be able to impact in the education system, frankly, are around extracurricular activities affiliated with schools, and I probably get that from my own personal experience. While my parents may have expected a certain grade level to come home, frankly that wouldn't have been achieved without extracurricular activities. That speaks to the kind of relationships I expect to be engendered in the classroom and how teachers are made to feel: that we actually consider them to be professionals and that they would work in a professional capacity.

We don't have long to go in this term, but I would hope that, sometime in the future, we are going to get away from a discussion about minutes in a classroom with our professionals and move to constant, ongoing improvement and change, a discussion about quality of education where our teachers are totally engaged in a discussion about quality programming, setting standards around quality programming and being seen to be absolutely the best in the world on that front. But I know

that a great environment in our school system will mean that teachers who have been incredibly formative for me as I was growing up will always have the opportunity to do that for our children.

Mr. Zimmer: Mr. Chairman, can I ask a question of the deputy or just the minister?

The Chair: Absolutely.

Mr. Zimmer: Deputy, I understand you're relatively new in the ministry, so I'll ask you the same legacy question, projecting ahead to the time when you leave the ministry, be it in a year or two or three. From the administration of the education bureaucracy, what would you like your legacy to be?

Mr. Levin: I can say that actually I was not anticipating ever being in this job. In fact, when I was deputy minister in Manitoba, I once had a nightmare that I had been appointed deputy minister in Ontario.

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: What year was that?

Mr. Levin: That would have been around 2000 or 2001.

I came to the job because, when I met with the former minister and the Premier and they talked about what they wanted to do in education in Ontario, their program fit so well with my own beliefs about what needed to be done in public education. I felt that when they thought I could be helpful, it would be very hard to say no to that.

My goals are pretty straightforward and, I think, very consistent with the government's goals, which I imagine is why I'm in the job. They have to do with improving student outcomes across the province. Although I think we have much to be proud of in public education, there is still lots of room for improvement; we still have too many kids who are not doing well enough, who are not graduating, who are in special education and not benefiting from that and so on—to improve the broad range of outcomes, not just narrowly in terms of academic achievement but more broadly in terms of citizenship and engagement in the school and in the community; to reduce the inequities in achievement, so that there is less inequity in our system than there has been and the gaps are smaller between the top and the bottom of the achievement range; and to increase public confidence in public education, so that people of the province believe that the \$17 billion they are investing in public education is money well spent.

Mr. Zimmer: From more of an administrative point of view rather than a political point of view, what do you say the two or three biggest challenges are within the education bureaucracy, broadly speaking? And I don't use the term "bureaucracy" in any pejorative sense.

Mr. Levin: We refer to ourselves as bureaucrats also; I think that's safe.

One would be to move the ministry so it is more sensitive to the needs of the system, so that we are not just in the business of dumping stuff onto the schools but actually working very actively with the boards and schools so that they can do the things we are asking them to do, which means more coherence, more consistency and greater alignment across our range of policy meas-

ures; and secondly, to improve the extent to which we pay attention to implementation, so it isn't just announcing a policy, but then what that actually means. Does it actually come into effect, does it work and does it benefit students? The third, on the communication side, is to do the work of ensuring that intentions are broadly understood among educators and among the public, because we only get to do what the public is willing to let us do. So we have to be cognizant all the time of whether we are doing a good job of communicating our strengths and weaknesses and challenges to parents, citizens and educators.

Mr. Zimmer: My last question, just following up on those ambitions: What do you see as the two or three largest challenges in terms of getting the material resources to effect those changes or to leave that legacy?

Mr. Levin: I don't think our main challenges are material resource challenges. I think our main challenges have to do with what I sometimes refer to as will and skill; that is, people's desire to do what needs to be done, and then their capacity. Sometimes people have good will, but they don't quite understand how to do the things they want to do. That's a capacity issue within the ministry: Do people have the skills required? Sometimes it's understanding; people have had quite narrow jobs and we're asking them to think more broadly about what we're trying to do overall as a ministry and to see their work in the context of the larger strategic framework of the ministry as a whole and the government's objectives in education. But I don't personally feel that our main challenges are around resource levels. I think we're adequately resourced.

Mr. Zimmer: So it's the old story of a cultural shift or paradigm shift in thinking about education.

Mr. Levin: I do want to say that I think I am very fortunate to work with some fantastic people in the ministry. I'm very, very proud of my senior management team, and I'm very proud of the ministry as a whole. We have a lot of people who work very hard and care very deeply about education.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Deputy.

Mr. Ramal.

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Mr. Khalil Ramal (London–Fanshawe): Thank you, Mr. Chair. A question for the minister: In our semi-annual meeting with the Thames Valley board last Friday, they told us that they achieved 75% of class size. I wonder if that percentage exists only in London or across the province of Ontario. They've achieved the 75%, which goes alongside our target for this year. So can you tell us, is that just in London—

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: Where we're at right now in looking at the number of primary classes that are achieving the goal that we've set, which is 20 students or less, is we are now at 48% of those classes being within the right range; that is up from 30% when we started a couple of years ago. Of course, I think it's fair to say that in our first year of government we had to sort out a lot of the capital issues, teacher issues, the length of time it

takes to hire teachers, etc. Now we are well on our way. What became very clear in tabling the budget at the end of March was that there will be more money available, both in capital and in operating, to continue to move forward on the primary class size initiative.

There are several boards in Ontario that are actually doing quite well. The Dufferin-Peel Catholic board is one of those boards. It is actually meeting, and in that case exceeding, the target of the numbers, where the caps are even smaller—they're well below the cap. So we're very pleased to see that some have aggressively gone after this. Others have struggled because there are capacity issues in boards that are very difficult to contend with, and recognizing those problems—an area like the Thames board, where you come from, has a mix of urban and rural within the same board boundaries, which makes capacity issues very difficult to resolve. I know that the previous minister had significant discussion around this issue, but capital is important in trying to meet our goal. So we have to find a way to solve those problems, and that is something that we're prepared to work with. But we're very happy to see in particular the progress the board in your region is making.

Mr. Ramal: Another question: I was listening to Mr. Marchese talking as if our ministry and our government are pressuring the boards across the province of Ontario to meet this target without equipping them with the financial tools and teachers. What can you say to that?

Hon. Ms. Pupatello: I find it interesting. What any member who comes from a previous government is probably having a hard time contending with is that we're not about just throwing the money out the door, although we've certainly done that, to the tune of \$2 billion into the education system for elementary and secondary. But what's really important is that this Premier is intending to get results, and the results are very specific. We were very clear about what those results were that we were looking for, and we said that in our 2003 platform document: We need the dropout rates to fall; we need the primary class sizes to fall; we need literacy and numeracy test results to increase. Those are very specific. If we stopped any parent on the street today and said, "I want you to see"—in fact, you and I did that in the last election. We said, "These are the goals that we're setting for ourselves in education," and they are wildly behind these initiatives. But frankly, governments historically have not done that; they've been about the money only.

We're not prepared to do that, because this Premier intends to have a qualitative discussion with parents about how much better the system is for their child. It's not just about, "Are you in the fanciest school, the biggest school, the best-looking school?" It's about, "How's your kid doing in school?" Because in the end that's what matters in terms of end results for that child: Will that child reach his or her potential? If a child has the potential to reach a B level, is your child getting to the B? That's the question that parents need to ask and the school system needs to have the answer for. Those questions haven't been asked in the past, not by the

Ontario government. I will say, though, that there are boards across Ontario that have had excellence on their minds for many, many years, and they've not been supported sufficiently.

In fact, we just came through an era of the last government that turned education on its ear, and in so doing was simply about the money. What they did was remove \$2 billion out of the system, even though you saw an increase in the number of students overall. Now we're in a different place. We have an overall decrease in the number of students enrolled in Ontario, but we have had a dramatic increase in the level of funding, recognizing that if you want excellence, you need to be able to support that with the right level of resources. What we now are working with in a new relationship with boards and with federations is making sure our resources get to the right place to achieve the results that we're looking for. Trustees that I've met and spoken with so far, teachers and parents seem quite happy that we're on the road to success.

Mr. Ramal: Thank you, Minister.

Mr. Wilkinson: How much time do we have, Mr. Chair?

The Chair: You've got about five to six minutes.

Mr. Wilkinson: That's great, because I actually like listening to the minister's answers. I want to make sure you have enough time to respond.

I want to first of all congratulate you. Just for the benefit of the committee, I was at an event for the Ontario Catholic School Trustees' Association last week. Minister, you had spoken at lunch. I didn't hear your remarks, but I can tell you that whatever you said was well received, because I was there later on in the day and they were very happy that you were able to find time in your new and very busy schedule to go and see them.

Just following up on some questions about grades 7 and 8 and high school, I just want to let you know that in my riding of Perth-Middlesex, and particularly with the Avon Maitland public board, there was a great debate that raged about whether or not grades 7 and 8 should be in high schools where we are in rural Ontario, with declining enrolment. I think the board did a very good job of consulting with people. That experiment, from what I hear from my constituents, has been successful because grades 7 and 8 are segregated from the high school population, but all of the resources from a high school are available to those children. So I think they're getting a higher-quality education. The parents are relieved that that segregation assumes that you don't have a bunch of 12-year-olds hanging out with a bunch of 18-year-olds, which, as a father, I agree with heartily. I invite you to come, if you would like to see on the ground a place where that is happening right now, and talk to those students, teachers and the school board. You'd be more than welcome in my hometown.

I'd like to ask specifically, though—and this is a burning issue in rural Ontario. I represent a rural riding, and it's really the kind of question asked by my constituents: "There's this new minister from Windsor. What is her commitment to rural education?" I know your pre-

decessor was very clear about the vision that he saw, that rural schools were vital to our rural communities and that schools form the heart of many of those communities. I'd just like to ask you, as you come to this job, what is your perception of rural publicly funded education?

Hon. Ms. Papatello: I appreciate the question because I think it's important to put on the record, as has the Premier, that rural Ontario is important to us economically, to the citizenship of the rest of the province, and that we benefit by having a strong and vibrant rural Ontario. The hub of that in most rural communities is the school. A school has to be viewed as not just a function of education but where a lot of community activity exists, surrounds, and frankly happens because the school is there. That's why there's an awful lot that needs to go into decision-making about expansion, rebuild, move or closure, which we've seen an awful lot of over the years. We have to line that up with some significant issues that rural Ontario is facing across the board, not just with our kids but overall, such as declining populations. So infrastructure in small towns, not just for schools but in many, many other discussions, is a significant issue, with people moving away from small-town Ontario towards a job that they perceive to be affiliated in an urban community.

I believe we have had in the last two and a half years a significant investment in rural Ontario, and a large part of that has been through education, where we have said very clearly that the whole community needs to come to the table, not just education, because that school is not just about education; it's about everything else. The best example is likely our community use of schools, where we've actually made the schools more affordable for local groups to come in and access that school property and have the board not penalized financially because of that. I think we had some \$20 million going into community use of schools. It has been a tremendous success.

In my short tenure as a new minister, I have now met with four or five separate groups in rural Ontario around schools and their school issues as they relate to capital. I'm looking forward to taking that challenge on and hope that, with your help, we're going to resolve some of that.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Minister.

Just to inform the committee, we have four hours and 48 minutes remaining to complete these estimates for the Ministry of Education. This committee now stands adjourned until following routine proceedings on Tuesday, May 2, in room 151.

The committee adjourned at 1759.

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