

November 15, 2016

[Original]

French Immersion

Mr. Higgs: The Premier will recall that, with my final question on Thursday of last week, I asked him to take the weekend to reflect on his plan of drastically shifting the early immersion program to Grade 1 without a plan or the justification to do so. I already pointed out that this change was not included in the 10-year education plan, so it was a complete shock to everyone at the district level. Already, we have two district education councils publicly opposing this move. Anglophone West and Anglophone South have both brought forward a variety of well-thought-out reasons that this move should not occur at this point. After a weekend to reflect, has the Premier realized that making this change at this point is not in the best interest of our children?

Hon. Mr. Gallant: For the fifth day in a row, I believe, in question period, I think that I will make the same points that I have been making since day one. We committed in our platform in 2014 that we would restore French immersion to Grade 1. That is exactly what we did. We have based this commitment on a report that was commissioned by the previous government, in which the Leader of the Opposition was the Minister of Finance. It had a nonpartisan approach. It had an exhaustive and inclusive approach of meeting with parents, with teachers, with students, with experts, with stakeholders, and with many more New Brunswickers. They came to the conclusion that Grade 1 is what is best for New Brunswick.

We committed to doing it, and we are getting it done. We have also made it very clear that we are going to do everything that we can to mitigate some of the very legitimate concerns that people have, based on the way that it was done previously when it was in Grade 1. We are also going to back it up and support them by investing the most in education in the history of our province.

Mr. Higgs: I had the privilege of joining the other political party leaders and the Education Minister last Thursday to take part in a panel discussion with CBC's Terry Seguin. As our discussion concluded, the Education Minister outlined, in his words, that so many things are going on right now at the same time in our school system—Can ISD model dealing with mental health issues, dealing with the Department of Social Development, and dealing with the Department of Health, a poverty plan with ESIC, the private sector getting involved in the Department of Education, and enhancing child care.

I will ask the Premier the same question that I asked the Education Minister last Thursday. With so many things going on at the same time already, why would we introduce something with the complexity of changing the current immersion program from Grade 3 to Grade 1, all the while doing this without a plan? Thank you.



[Translation]

Hon. Mr. Gallant: We have a plan. When we made our announcement, we very clearly indicated that we would make more investments and that we would make sure we did everything we could to ease people's concerns with early French immersion by restoring its entry point to where it used to be, that is to Grade 1.

[Original]

I think that we have, yet again, seen the difference between our views and the views of the Leader of the Opposition on education. He believes that we should be cutting in education. That is what he did when he was the Minister of Finance. We believe that we should be investing more in our youth, investing more in education. The Leader of the Opposition gets up and questions programs like ISD, which is helping our youth with mental health challenges, programs like ESIC, which is reducing poverty throughout the province, and programs that will enhance child care. He says that we should stop some of these programs because there is too much going on. We completely disagree, and we will continue to invest in these programs and in our youth.

Education System

Mr. Higgs: Strategic investment gets results. Throwing money at the wall does not. The point is that what we need are plans to improve our educational system. I would like to return to the recent assessment results that have caused such engagement across the province. If there is one good thing to come out of these assessment results, it is the unprecedented level of public interest and public concern over the continuing decline of basic skills among our school children.

The Grade 6 assessments are devastating. Four out of five children are not getting math or science, and almost half are struggling with reading. What is the Premier's answer? We do not need to evaluate that. We will just throw more money at it. We will throw money at it. Tax dollars will increase, and we hope that it will get better. We need to make money work for us, and we need to listen to the educators. We do not know what those assessments actually look like. Openness and transparency should allow all New Brunswickers an opportunity to see these assessments. Will the Premier commit to making these assessments public?

[Translation]

Hon. Mr. Gallant: Today, once again, I am very surprised that the Leader of the Opposition wants to keep on discussing the fact that he wants us to invest less in education. Does he not understand that education is crucial for our economy in the long term? Does he not understand that education will help us to offer the best quality of life possible to all our young people and all New Brunswickers?

I think it is very regrettable that the Leader of the Opposition seems to be saying that investments to support our children in terms of mental health, to reduce poverty, and to



support day cares and, of course, early childhood development are a waste. This is unbelievable. However, it is not surprising to us since, when he was Minister of Finance, he made cuts in education. We will do the opposite; we are going to invest more in education and our young people.

[Original]

Mr. Higgs: At the CBC political panel, host Terry Seguin told us that he personally had had classroom teachers approach him and say: We cannot speak honestly about what we would like to see happen in the classroom. I think we have all experienced that very same thing. Yet, the Premier would carry on and have us believe that everyone has had a voice in this process. They will not join the public discussion because they are worried about the consequences for their careers.

The Education Minister was not aware of a law that prevents classroom teachers from helping to fix the system by speaking out, but he is now aware of it. I hope that he has shared that knowledge with the Premier. The input of our classroom teachers is absolutely critical, since they have a unique understanding of what is going on in our classrooms. We need their voice. Will the Premier work with me to establish a mechanism... If he truly wants to have the people in the classroom speak and be heard, will he work to establish a mechanism, a process, by which classroom teachers can help us fix the system?

[Translation]

Hon. Mr. Gallant: The Leader of the Opposition says that some people do not want to make suggestions or even talk about their concerns. However, when he started with his questions, he clearly indicated that some districts made suggestions and talked about their concerns. We appreciate this, and it is just fine. I would even say that having a discussion and a debate is helpful for us.

However, in the end, it is very important to remind the Leader of the Opposition that we followed a very inclusive and comprehensive independent process led by a commission. This commission had received the approval of his government, when his party was in office, to speak with New Brunswickers and give us recommendations as to what we should do with regard to early French immersion.

[Original]

At the end of the day, the report that they commissioned when they were in government in 2012 said loud and clear that we should restore French immersion to Grade 1. There was a nonpartisan, independent commission that listened to New Brunswickers, and we are going to follow its advice.

Mr. Higgs: With that suggestion, I would like to think that we are starting a precedent here where the Premier will follow our advice, because there is lots more to come.



In the October *Royal Gazette*, we read of changes to the *Education Act*. These changes add evaluation to the mandate of provincial curriculum committees. The changes state the following: Previous committees under this regulation are abolished.

The plan of organization of each of the provincial curriculum and evaluation advisory committees shall be established by the Minister.

Here, again, is the opportunity for more politics in the classroom. Right away, we can see our problems. We cannot help but notice that there is no acknowledgment of the subject discipline expertise as a requirement for membership. It appears that this change has nothing to do with the development of a content-based, specific curriculum outline for any subject area. Can the Premier or minister explain the reasoning behind this change, beyond providing a scapegoat for the poor decisions made by government?

Hon. Mr. Gallant: Poor decisions made by government? I will talk about poor decisions made by government. When he was the Minister of Finance and he cut into education, that was a poor decision. In fact, the President of the NBTA recently said that a lot of the challenges that we face in our education system are because of those cuts that he made when he was Minister of Finance. For the Leader of the Opposition to get up and criticize the way that we are approaching education by working with teachers, by working with community leaders, I think, is very unfortunate, considering that he was the Minister of Finance of a government that cut education and had no education plan for our students.

I know that the Leader of the Opposition would like us to follow suit with what he did when he was Minister of Finance, but we will not do that. We will not cut into education. We will invest more. We do not think that investing in education is throwing money at the wall. We think it is the best investment that we can possibly make to grow our economy, to have a skilled workforce, and to have a strong social fabric for all.

Mr. Higgs: It is rich. Did we not hear a quotation on CBC just the other day? It was the previous Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development talking about defending the cuts to the teachers that this government made in its mandate this time around.

When I talk about putting the guns down and letting the classroom teachers speak for themselves, I am saying that it is time we did just that. Let's not hide behind political rhetoric. Let's not hide behind something by saying: I committed to doing it. I have no basis for doing it, but I am committed to doing it.

That is what has sunk this province time and time again. If we are going to do politics differently, let's allow the classroom teachers and principals to speak. Let's do a poll of the principals and ask: What do you think of throwing a program in place without a plan? Let's allow the districts, which are now voting and saying that they do not want this... You say that you are listening. You are not listening. I am asking the Premier to listen. Thank you.

Hon. Mr. Gallant: Shortly after announcing that we would fulfill our 2014 commitment to put French immersion back to Grade 1, the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development



and I met with principals, and we met with principals from the Anglophone sector as well very shortly after the announcement. We sat there, and we listened to their concerns, ideas, and suggestions. They were very optimistic about the future of the education system in the province.

Now, the member opposite wants to talk about cuts. Did we make difficult decisions? Absolutely. However, I can tell you that every single dollar that would have been within the education system, which was a difficult decision made by our government, was reinvested in the education system and we invested more than ever before. That is unlike when the member opposite was the Minister of Finance and kept cutting in education. Now, he has the audacity to get up and tell me to cut things that are helping mental health in our school system, that are helping to reduce poverty, and that are helping to reduce child care. I will not make those cuts.

Mr. Higgs: This is what we see. We do not have a plan. All we want to do is throw money and hope for the best. We have results that are dismal. We do not want to talk to the teachers, but we will talk to them after the announcement. We will come in, and we will tell them how good our announcement was. We will convince them that, yes, we will listen, but the announcement has already been made. Consultation is before the announcement. It is with the people of the province. If we are going to have engagement, we are going to listen.

If the Premier is so convinced that the people are buying this, why not allow them to speak? Open up the floor to the teachers in the classroom and say: You tell us what we need because we want better results. We believe that the professionals in the classroom can realize that. I ask the Premier again to open up the floor to classroom teachers and principals and to let them decide when we make these changes. Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Mr. Gallant: Once again, I want to say this: Since we took office, we have been working with teachers and community leaders, and this is precisely how we developed our education plan.

During our 2014 election campaign, we had made a promise and a commitment to restore the early French immersion entry point to Grade 1. This decision was based on a report from a commission established by the previous government, in which the current Leader of the Opposition was Minister of Finance.

Therefore, I do not understand why the Leader of the Opposition keeps on asking the same questions.

[*Original*]

To say that we do not have a plan... We have education plans that were developed with teachers. The members opposite are the ones that did not have an education plan. Was there basis for the decision? A report that the members opposite commissioned told us to put French immersion in Grade 1.



French Immersion

Mr. Jody Carr: Going back to the facts, the 2012 report that the Premier refers to says that, if there were a change to Grade 1 French immersion, the needed support services for struggling students would have to be put in place and recruitment of French second language teachers would be needed. Also, converting one third of the English classes to French immersion requires 200 new French second language teachers.

In addition, the Premier talked about consultation. However, the teachers have said no, and the school districts have said no. The opposition members have said no, and the cochair of the Anglophone 10-year plan, Karen Power, has said no. It is not found in the 10-year plan.

Again, it was confirmed by the Premier and the minister that there is no plan in place for the French immersion change and implementation, yet the government says that it is full steam ahead. Will the Premier assure this House and the parents that the recommendations in the 2012 report will be followed?

Hon. Mr. Gallant: So, they are aware of that report. They are aware.

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker: Order.

Hon. Mr. Gallant: Why is it that they will admit that there was a report that says that we should be going back to Grade 1 and they will not even touch that report or even mention that it exists? The Leader of the Opposition will pretend that it does not, saying that our decision, in his opinion, is not based on fact. However, now, they are saying that there is a report and they are quoting the report and asking whether we are going to follow it.

The Leader of the Opposition has to get his team in order. When they were in government, they cut in education. They had a report telling them that French immersion should be in Grade 1, and they ignored that report. They now want us to cut into the programs that have helped our students with mental health challenges, that are helping lift children out of poverty, and that are helping with child care. We completely, unequivocally do not agree with the Leader of the Opposition. We must invest more in education and not cut, as he would have us do.

Mr. Jody Carr: We, again, have to go back to the facts. We have to remind the House that it was the Liberals who changed the Grade 1 entry point to Grade 3 in the first place. That caused a disruption. It was the government in which I was minister that commissioned the 2012 report that he is talking about. We have talked about that since the Leader of the Opposition raised these questions. Again, it is now a Liberal government that is switching the entry point back to Grade 1.

In this 2012 report, it says that resources are needed for struggling students. Do you know why? It is because the students who were struggling were not receiving TAs in the old Grade 1 program, the resources for literacy and specialists were not provided in the Grade 1 program, and students were forced to be kicked out of the French immersion program that created the



streaming effect. When you tell us that you are going to do all that you can and you cannot provide details...

I can look wherever I want to look, Premier.

When you tell us that you will do all that you can, well, show us.

Mr. Speaker: Time.

[Translation]

Hon. Mr. Gallant: As we said at the beginning, when we made our announcement, we will honour our election platform commitment to restore the early French immersion entry point to Grade 1. We said we would do everything we could to ease people's concerns about the system by restoring the entry point to where it used to be. This is what we have been saying since the beginning.

The member is speaking directly to me instead of addressing his comments to you, Mr. Speaker. He should know, since he used to be Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, that we must start by determining how many people will register for Grade 1 early French immersion. Once we know this, we will have a better idea of how we can work with districts, teachers, and community leaders to make sure we are able to ease people's concerns. Of course, we must invest more in this sector to give our young people the educational opportunities they need and deserve.

[Original]

Mr. Jody Carr: He is saying that we cannot put a plan in place for French immersion until we know how many children are entering into kindergarten, yet he does not recognize the fact that he needs to give assurances to parents that the support that was recommended in the 2012 report will be in place. The problems that were created were the streaming effect, because students were not given the necessary support in those classes, and, also, the recruitment of French second language teachers...

He talks about hearing from teachers and getting input. Well, we, as well, have actually been receiving input from teachers. I have one e-mail from a principal who was at the very meeting that the Premier talks about, that he attended. They were told: "The ship has sailed on that." He said that "was a very bitter pill for a lot of administrators and the climate in the room changed dramatically... The impact on my school and the climate it has created has made a challenging job more difficult".

A common theme was: We were listened to but not heard. The parents need to be given... They need to decide in the next two weeks whether the support will be given to them...

Mr. Speaker: Time.



Hon. Mr. Gallant: Again, I have made it very clear since day one, and the Minister of Education has made it very clear since day one: We are going to do everything that we can to mitigate any of the concerns people had about the way the system was before. We cannot be much clearer than that. We need to know, of course, what type of enrollment will happen and how many people will register for the program to be able to understand exactly how we can go about it.

What I do not understand is the member opposite insinuating that, if we do put in the supports from that report, which he supports, apparently... He supports that part of the report but not the main recommendation of the report. He supports the support that would be given for the main recommendation of the report. If we were to have many of the things that were mentioned in the report as support, would the members opposite support putting French immersion back in Grade 1?

[Translation]

Extra-Mural Program

Ms. Dubé: Given that a few months have passed since our discussion on the topic, I am going to try asking the Minister of Health some questions to try to get an answer. I will give him the opportunity to provide an update on where he stands in his negotiations to entrust the private sector with the service management of a program that is dear to all and that works very well for the people of this province, the Extra-Mural Program.

Therefore, my question for the minister is the following: Could he give us an update, given that several months have passed since he set his goals for the establishment of the new service management?

Hon. Mr. Boudreau: To start with, the opposition member is trying to oversimplify things slightly. Actually, we are not talking about privatizing the Extra-Mural Program, and we must agree on this. We have begun discussions with Medavie EMS, a non-profit corporation based here in New Brunswick, to look at the management of the Extra-Mural Program, Ambulance New Brunswick, which is already managed by this company, and Tele-Care 811, in an attempt to improve cooperation between the three programs.

Each program has its strengths, but each one also has certain weaknesses. This is about trying to make sure we maximize the contribution from each of these programs for the benefit of patients, and discussions are under way. When we are able to announce something concrete, I will be pleased to do so.

Ms. Dubé: So, this means the minister is going forward with his plan to privatize Extra-Mural Program services, despite the fact that Vitalité Health Network has spoken publicly on several occasions about this issue. Recently, at a Standing Committee on Crown Corporations meeting, representatives from this network said loud and clear that they were taking care of management of the Extra-Mural Program, which is a hospital without walls providing services to communities. This network is able to continue with the management and is prepared to



work on improving services. The network wants to work with ambulance services and certainly with Tele-Care 811.

Once again, then, why would we pay another corporation when we already have a system that works very, very well?

Maybe the minister wants to enlighten us and tell us that things are not going well, but, otherwise, I can tell you that New Brunswickers are satisfied. So, Vitalité Health Network wants to continue in the same direction, the N.B. Senior Citizens' Federation does not want you to touch the program, and health professionals do not want...

[Original]

Mr. Speaker: Time, member.

Hon. Mr. Boudreau: Again, the member opposite is trying to insinuate that we are privatizing the Extra-Mural Program. That is not the case. It is very important to point that out.

The Extra-Mural Program does fantastic work in New Brunswick. However, no program is perfect, and there are areas in which we could improve the Extra-Mural Program, just as there are areas in which we could improve Ambulance New Brunswick and the Tele-Care 811 program. What is being contemplated here is the possibility of contracting the management of these three programs to a nonprofit corporation, based in New Brunswick, which brings its own expertise to the table.

Those discussions are ongoing. No decision has been finalized yet. When those discussions are finalized and a decision has been made, we will gladly communicate that to the opposition and to everybody else. Discussions are ongoing.

[Translation]

Ms. Dubé: The two health networks are currently managing the Extra-Mural Program, and the public is asking for this to continue. In the spirit of continuity and cooperation, and given the synergy that we have in our hospitals, health professionals are asking for the program to remain with the health networks.

Therefore, I am putting the same question again to the minister, who is still having discussions behind closed doors. He made a decision on his own, without consulting anyone beforehand. Therefore, I am asking the minister to listen to people and to make his position better known. Where does he want to go with this? I can tell you that people do not want you to break a system that is currently working very well.

Is the minister prepared to listen to Horizon Health Network and Vitalité Health Network and to let them manage the Extra-Mural Program in the interests of everyone?



[Original]

Mr. Speaker: Time.

[Translation]

Hon. Mr. Boudreau: Once again, I find it regrettable that the member opposite continues to spread misinformation. Various stakeholders and health professionals were present for all the discussions we have had. During this process, we consulted extensively with health networks, unions, and professional associations many times. Discussions with Medavie EMS have also certainly taken place, but there have been a lot of discussions and consultations. When a final decision is made, we will certainly let everyone know. However, discussions and consultations are still under way. In the best interests of New Brunswickers, we are committed to providing patients with the best services.

Hospitals

Mr. Coon: Wait times in our hospital emergency rooms are unacceptable. The standard for emergency rooms is to have fewer than 4% of patients become frustrated and leave without being seen. In most New Brunswick emergency rooms, this percentage is two or three times higher. More than 10% to 12% of people waiting in our emergency rooms leave without being seen by a physician. Can the Minister of Health tell the House how he will ensure that hospitals meet these standards?

Hon. Mr. Boudreau: The member opposite is offering a valid point of view. We certainly all want to shorten wait lists. This is why we are trying to transform the system. This is why we are working with the various health professionals to try to modernize the health care system. This is why we are working with organizations such as the New Brunswick Medical Society to try to change the way we deliver primary care.

The goal is to be able to provide more services to people in their communities and at home instead of having them in our hospitals occupying beds, which affects surgery wait lists. So, the department is working on several different initiatives, precisely to ease concerns...

[Original]

Mr. Speaker: Time, minister.

Mr. Coon: In fact, only about 20% of ER patients can be seen safely outside of a hospital ER. Forty percent of patients coming through our emergency room doors are Status 3 and must be seen by a doctor. 40%. The benchmark for those patients is that 80% of them should be seen within 30 minutes. Our ERs are missing this target by four, five, and even six times across this province. This has created a serious patient safety issue. My question is: What is the minister doing to arrest this threat to patient safety?



Hon. Mr. Boudreau: Again, patient safety is something that is very important. Transforming our health care system and modernizing our health care system are things that are a priority for this government. Our three main priorities have been job creation, the economy, and investing more in education and in health care. We are acting on those recommendations.

There are many different initiatives that are under way as we speak. The member opposite talks as if we can just flick a switch and everything is going to go away. It is not that simple. We are investing in community health centres, and we are investing in nursing homes. Just this morning, our Premier and Deputy Premier toured the new Downtown Community Health Centre here in Fredericton. This is an investment to try to keep people in the community, out of the ER, and out of the hospital beds up at the DECH. By making these types of investments, by modernizing the system, and by working with our doctors to modernize collaborative practice, this is how we are going to address wait-lists.

Mr. Coon: The patients I am concerned about here are the ones whose conditions get worse, much worse, while they are sitting in the waiting room waiting to see a doctor, or those who leave in frustration and who are actually very ill, with serious consequences when they get home, and end up back in the hospital by ambulance. ER doctors are permitted to call for extra help in a crisis when there is a train wreck or a plane crash.

My question for the minister is this: Will he direct the health authorities to immediately define the threat posed to patient safety when ERs fail to meet their benchmarks as a crisis so that our ER doctors have the authority to call in the help that they need to safeguard the safety of their patients?

Hon. Mr. Boudreau: I would suggest to the member opposite and to both parties opposite that, if they want to address issues such as the wait-lists, they have to stop opposing every single reform and every single idea that we bring forward to modernize and revamp our health care system. If we continue to do the same things in the same way over and over again but expect different results, that is simply not going to happen.

That is why we need to take innovative approaches like the approach that we are looking at taking with Medavie and innovative approaches like the approach that we are taking with the New Brunswick Medical Society and collaborative family practices to make sure that patients get same-day and next-day access to their family doctors. That is why my department, along with the department for seniors and the department for families and youth are investing in things like the Home First Strategy to make sure that we are able to care for seniors in the comfort of their own homes. It is better for them. It is better for government. It is better for everybody involved. If only the opposition would...

Mr. Speaker: Time, minister. The time for oral questions has expired.

