

December 9, 2016

[Original]

French Immersion

Mr. Higgs: The responses by the Education Minister to my questions yesterday caused great concern. What we can gather from his responses is that the likely drop in enrollment by going back to the Grade 1 entry point is of no concern to him. It should be, because it certainly is to the schools in rural New Brunswick.

This is urgent because, in some of the school closure studies done in the rural schools, the DECs cited lack of immersion as a reason to close the school. If a school loses its immersion program because the government went back to a less inclusive model, that is unfair to small communities. Again, I will ask whether the minister will commit today that he will instruct the DECs not to use the loss of the early immersion program as a reason to close a school under Policy 409.

Hon. Mr. Kenny: The concern that I have again today is the repetitiveness. It is like a doll that, when you take the string and wind it up, it goes over and over and over again.

This is serious, though. We are going to put the proper resources in place. We had consultation with our DECs. We are communicating with all our educators through the province. As time goes on, we will find out what the numbers will be and we will continue to work to make sure that we have the proper resources in place.

We have an opposition that always wants to put everything on pause and find something controversial to talk about. Talk about negativity. On this side of the House, we are getting things done. On this side of the House, we are going to have the best education system moving forward. Just in the past couple of months, we settled pay equity with our educational assistants and librarians. Just yesterday, we signed a deal with the bus drivers and custodians. We are working with our educators. We are working with our public, and we are getting things done.

Mr. Higgs: Unfortunately, the only thing that we are not doing is following a fact-based decision process. I want to be crystal clear on this point this morning—and more than fair to the minister—regarding this political plan to change early immersion and the possible impact on rural schools. For the final time, let me ask the minister whether he will commit today that he will instruct DECs not to use the loss of the early immersion program as a reason to close schools under Policy 409. Just a simple answer is all that I am looking for.

Hon. Mr. Kenny: We will work with the policies that are in place right now, and then we will work and communicate with our DECs. We will make sure that we have the proper resources in



place for the enrollment for the upcoming school year, in 2017. It is all about communication, and that is what I feel I have the ability to do—to communicate with New Brunswickers and have ongoing dialogue, returning phone calls and talking to the people who are actually doing the good things in New Brunswick—our educators.

With the previous government, we saw a government that slashed and cut within the Department of Education and muzzled all our educators and our civil service and had them petrified. Right now, I think that the member opposite is just trying to find some political scores. We made a platform commitment, and, unlike the opposition, we actually honoured that platform commitment. We are going to continue to work on a positive note, deal with the challenges facing us going forward in our education system, and make sure that we do the proper thing to have the best education for all.

Mr. Speaker: Time.

Mr. Higgs: I have to deviate just a little bit here because the minister was accusing us of muzzling educators. That might, by implication, suggest that the government does not want the teachers muzzled. We have asked, over and over again, for their input. We have always asked for their input, so I take exception to the comment. The implication is that the government wants to hear the teachers' voices. We have asked, over and over again: Will they allow the classroom teachers to speak? Will this government say: We want to hear from the classroom teachers? Let's do that. Will the minister agree that we need their voices? Take the muzzles off, let the teachers speak on this program, and let them fix it for us because we have proven, over and over again in this House, that we cannot get it done. The teachers can get it done, and that is all we are asking for.

Hon. Mr. Kenny: We are getting things done. We are communicating with our educators. In fact, I get lots of e-mails and lots of telephone calls and I have one-on-one meetings with educators throughout the province. We have been very busy dialoguing with our educators, and we want to continue that good relationship. That is the way that we want to do things in New Brunswick. We have the opposition, again, trying to fearmonger and say that the sky is falling. Yes, we are making changes, and, yes, it will cause a little bit of unrest. There is no doubt about that. However, we have to make changes to be able to improve. The status quo cannot remain.

I believe that, with the consultation that we did with our 10-year education programs being implemented, with the dialogue that we have with our educators, and with the constant consultation and speaking with our educators... In fact, I met with two yesterday who came in with some great ideas. There are some great innovators in New Brunswick, and we want to make sure that those innovators take their ideas and put them in a plan to move forward. Thank you.

Mr. Higgs: We did not get an answer about Policy 409 and the decision around French immersion programs not being offered, thus, making an opportunity for closure. We have seen



that, yes, we are communicating, but, also, this communication is: This is what we are doing, so here is the consultation. Maybe you missed it, but we did not have it.

We have heard numerous complaints that the sessions held for parents to ask questions about the political plan to change to early immersion failed to provide any answers or assurances. Some of the concerns of parents and administrators, for that matter, involved having qualified teachers. Parents have read the reports that finding qualified immersion teachers is already a challenge—one that is often not met—and this has many administrators in the system concerned about this sudden political decision. Will the minister tell the House about his government's teacher recruitment and human resource plan for this change to early immersion? Thank you.

Hon. Mr. Kenny: In any profession, there are issues with recruitment, no matter what sector it is. Education is not alone in this. We have put resources in place to be able to take a look at where we can find new recruits, who are coming through universities or are teachers in other jurisdictions in Canada. We are open for business here in the province.

Yes, there are challenges. There is no doubt about that, but we have the resources in place. When we see our enrollment numbers coming in and so on, at that time, we will have to take a look at where we are going to need resources, in specific areas. We are investing the proper dollars and resources in the proper areas. When the other government was in power, all it did was cut and slash. We are being very strategic on this. We have a lot of resources in place, and we will be able to meet those challenges in the new year, in 2017.

Mr. Higgs: My colleague the member for Hampton has told us that it is essential for schools to have their staffing resources in place no later than March for the following school year that begins in September. We can all read a calendar and realize that March is drawing near. Can the minister at least tell us, if he is working on a March deadline to have the proper teachers and resources in place, when he expects to put this plan together?

Hon. Mr. Kenny: Our plan is ongoing. We are working on it as we speak. Our department is working very diligently with all the schools in the districts throughout the province. Once we have final numbers coming in and we are able to see where those resources are needed, we will be able to provide that information. At this point in time, the information is being accumulated. We are working every day to see where the resources are needed.

What we have to say here is that we are going to put the most resources in place, the dollars in place, in our education system to make sure that we have the best resources in place. What we see here is doom and gloom every day from the opposition. It is not falling apart, as they say. I think we are improving our education system. It is going to be the best education system that New Brunswick has ever seen. Thank you.

Mr. Higgs: The concern, of course, is having people trained for any new program. The concern, of course, is that the announcements are made and then the facts go into place after that. It



sounds like a quality control program gone awry. Can the minister advise the House of any training and professional development plan that has been set in place for the teachers to work with struggling learners in immersion?

Hon. Mr. Kenny: As I said, we will be putting the proper resources in place to deal with the upcoming enrollment in the 2017 year. Our department is working diligently, along with the DEC's and the superintendents, to take a look at what is happening. What is taking place here is no different from any other year. We have the same issues every year that deal with rises in or different shifts in populations throughout the province.

There is nothing really different here right now, except that we are actually going to put the resources in the proper place. That is the difference. The former government, as soon as it went in, just cut, cut, cut. We are putting the proper resources in place. Once we have the proper numbers to be able to deal with that, we will be able to report to the House and see where we will be going. This is nothing different from what we have had in previous years. I think we are being more strategic and we are going to have a better system in place.

Mr. Higgs: What is of concern, of course, is nothing new under the sun. Here we have a plan that was instituted many, many years ago. It was replaced in 2007 or 2008 or in that range. We do not know the details of that plan. We are putting in another plan in the place of one that already existed—I guess you could go back and get the book from Recycle NB—yet what is going to happen here is still not well identified.

Can the minister, at the very least, inform the House of the timeline and the plan for curriculum review in immersion, if any such timeline or plan exists?

Hon. Mr. Kenny: Again, they are looking for specific dates and everything. There are a lot of moving targets in the Department of Education. What we are doing every day is learning. We are working with our educators, learning with experts in the field, to put the proper plans in place. That is what is happening.

We have to refresh the memory of the members opposite. We just put out the 10-year education plan in the last couple of months, so there is a lot of work going on behind the scenes and with our educators. The leader thinks that there is nothing going on in the Department of Education. I must tell you that the great people who work in the Department of Education throughout this province are working hard every single day to make sure... We have to give those people credit.

What we are seeing today and every day is that the member opposite is saying that the system is broken. I beg to differ. I think that we have the best education system, moving forward. What we are doing is starting from a point and we are moving forward. We are moving in a positive direction. I am really frustrated every day that the members opposite are trying to find an issue that is negative, negative, negative. We want to be positive.



Mr. Speaker: Time, minister.

Mr. Higgs: I think that the facts and the outcomes of what we see in the educational system and the results that we have seen for the past number of years speak for themselves. Unfortunately, the facts do not play any role in decision-making by this government. It does not matter.

Going back to the topic of having qualified teachers in place, we have already heard that there are instances in our system now of people who are, in fact, not teachers but who are teaching French immersion because qualified teachers are so hard to find. Is the minister aware that the *NB Education Act*, in its description of the role of a teacher, makes no reference to teaching the curriculum as part of the teacher's job? Does the minister agree that this is an oversight, at the very least?

Hon. Mr. Kenny: I will repeat again that we will be putting the proper resources in place. In fact, the former government cut leads. We are actually putting more leads in the classrooms. We are being very specific on making sure that we have the proper resources in the proper places when we have the proper data, which we will be able to get in the next couple of months.

We have a plan. The former government members had no plan. We are focused. They are not focused. We are providing more resources. They cut. We are being positive. They are being negative. You can see the stark difference between the opposition and the government.

What we want to tell New Brunswickers today is that we are moving forward with a plan that will be stable in the future. It is going to be the best system in the future, and it is going to be the best for all New Brunswickers throughout the province. It is not one cookie-cutter approach with the government. Everybody has a role to play in this, and we are counting on New Brunswickers to support this and to be positive on this, except for the doom and gloom on the other side.

Mr. Higgs: Of course, all of this was brought about by a 10-year plan that was part of the government's focus initially—a 10-year plan that did not include this change to French immersion. What an omission in the 10-year plan. It is a 10-year plan in which one of the cochairs said that we should have stability in the classroom and that we should not invoke any changes like this in the system at this time. We have two very conflicting messages here, despite the rhetoric that goes on and on and on. We talk about getting stability in the classroom. That is exactly what we are asking for—stability in the classroom. That is the opportunity that we have, the opportunity for voices in the classroom to play a role in the future development of the curriculum.

Will the minister explain the reasoning behind the new regulation on qualifications for teachers that are found in the latest *Royal Gazette*?



Hon. Mr. Kenny: The Leader of the Opposition is talking about stability. I do not know what has changed in the past couple of years since he was the Minister of Finance who could not get the job done to balance the books. When the former government cut and slashed in education, there was no stability there. Now, those members are talking about stability, so I am a little confused about where they are coming from. I agree that we have to put stability in the system, and I agree that we have to put the proper resources in the proper places, rather than just cut. This is what we are doing.

What is interesting, too, today is that the members opposite want to pick and choose. In 2012, that government on the other side, when those members were in power, hired two former educators, Ministers of Education, both a Conservative and a Liberal. They came out with a substantial report that was commissioned by the former Conservative government, which said that early French immersion should be in Grade 1. We also have the member who is the Education Critic who said that earlier is better. It is very confusing.

Mr. Speaker: Time.

Mr. Higgs: I guess that what I am to take from that response is that the qualifications that are required in the latest *Royal Gazette* ad may be a new issue for the minister.

Now, let me talk about the qualifications. The concern for me... We have seen the records. We have seen that our outcomes are not good. Our results are showing that we are not achieving what we want. We want to do better. Our goal is to do better. The new regulation that is posted in the *Royal Gazette* actually diminishes the requirement to teach in New Brunswick. Now we know that qualified immersion teachers are hard to find. I hate to think that this regulation is specifically designed to lower qualifications to teach early French immersion in the return to the Grade 1 entry point.

Can the minister explain what other reason his government would have to lower the qualifications, as found in the new regulation in the *Royal Gazette*?

Hon. Mr. Kenny: Again, I am going to explain to the opposition that we are going to be putting the proper resources in place and finding the best teachers from throughout the province to make sure that we have the proper resources in place in the upcoming school year. It is like any year. We have ups and downs throughout the province, and we have population shifts between the different jurisdictions in the province. We are going to be working with our specific districts to see what the enrollment numbers are, to make sure that we have the proper resources in place, and to do the proper recruiting. A lot of work is being done as we speak, right now, to address these issues.

What I want to say to New Brunswickers is that we are putting in place the proper resources. We are going to have the best education plans going forward in the future, and we will continue to improve month after month, year after year, into the future.



Enbridge Gas New Brunswick

Mr. Stewart: Is it not ironic that Enbridge is having an easier time getting a 50-year monopoly from the Gallant government than I am having getting a single coherent answer from the Energy Minister about the deal? It is 36 days and counting, and he has not given one straight and meaningful answer to my many, many detailed and meaningful questions. I am not going to stop asking because I am asking on behalf of the people of New Brunswick while he is answering on behalf of Len Hoyt and Enbridge.

Let's start. Does the minister agree that if Enbridge's current EUB application is approved and nothing changes, residential rates will go up by a minimum of 30%, 3%, and 3% over the next three years, an average of 12%?

Hon. Mr. Doucet: I had a tally yesterday, and 36 days is the day now. As far as I am concerned, on this side of the House, I think that this deal is old enough to vote. On that side of the House, they consider this lawsuit frivolous. They consider it a joke. The fact of the matter is that there are two suits totalling \$820 million—an erroneous amount—a financial risk to the taxpayers of the province, and they consider this to be a joke.

The fact of the matter is that what we are working on is removing the risk to the taxpayers without one cent from the taxpayer. We do not consider this a joke at all. Last night was the first night in committee that I had some substantive questions, and I salute the member from the Green Party because he was asking questions about the bill.

Mr. Speaker: Time.

Mr. Stewart: No answer again, no answer again. The Energy Minister, you might say, is going for the hat trick: Atcon, selling NB Power to Quebec, and, now, Enbridge. We know how the first two turned out for him and his associates, and the people of New Brunswick are bracing for the worst. I think there is going to be another route that we are going to take because there are many other unanswered questions and the public deserves to know the truth on all of them.

This is another area of concern about the Energy Minister. Will he be able to answer my question? This is a very simple one, and it certainly pertains to the bill. What happens to the rates if single end-user franchisees' gas usage decreases or stops altogether? Is there any protection for ratepayers?

Hon. Mr. Doucet: To the member opposite, I do not know where he is getting his questions. It must be from Craig Leonard, because he keeps on grabbing the phone. It is the only thing that I can figure out.

The EUB, the Energy and Utilities Board, makes a determination on rates based on the revenue requirements of the company. The caps have been established and set at 3%, 3%, and 3%. The



EUB, after 2020, has full authority to make the determination of rates. This is going to help stabilize rates for all sectors, including commercial and industrial, and provide some certainty against large increases to the customer classes, through the Energy and Utilities Board oversight. It does not allow for rate spikes, and that is something that we do not want to see—a spike.

He keeps mentioning that the sky is falling, and he keeps on talking...

Mr. Speaker: Time, minister.

Mr. Stewart: I will answer it. The EUB looks at the rate of return and the validity, and it does not protect the ratepayer. This bill seems to lock residential customers into a situation where they are using a fuel that is 10 to 12 times lower in price today than it was from 2010 to 2013, yet their bills have stayed just slightly lower than alternative energy sources, which have been increasing since then.

Is it not the case that you are ensuring that New Brunswick natural gas users will never benefit from the huge savings they could be enjoying with record low gas prices? For every drop in those prices, Enbridge gets to increase its distribution rate. Are you simply forcing these 12 000 people, who see gas bills multiple times lower in other jurisdictions, to keep paying above-market rates because of the mess Enbridge has made of the natural gas distribution system in this province?

Hon. Mr. Doucet: The member opposite has not read the bill. He has not taken the time to read the bill. I would like to know how much time we have spent in committee discussing this. He could not come up with substantive questions. Instead, he wants to drag lawyers, some very reputable lawyers, through the mud. That is what the member opposite's intentions are. I was asked questions about the lawyers involved, the conflict of interest, what statutes we are listing on this, the legal advice, and ministerial briefing notes. That is what the member opposite wanted to know. There was nothing to do with Bill 6 itself.

As a matter of fact, one of the questions the member opposite was upset about and spent 25 minutes on in the committee was that we tabled the deal in the Legislature, here in the House. He was worried that we did not put it on the Web site. What are we doing here? Putting it on the table of the Legislature could not be a more public opportunity, but he was concerned because it was not on...

Mr. Speaker: Time, minister.

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker: The member for Southwest Miramichi-Bay du Vin will come to order.



Economic Development

Mr. Coon: Lately, there has been positive economic news in our cities, but rural New Brunswick is being left behind. Rural communities and small towns have two to three times the unemployment rates of our cities, hovering around 15%. Last September, the Premier committed in the Economic Growth Plan to work with communities to develop their own regional economic development plans. These plans would focus on building on the specific attributes, assets, and opportunities in each region of the province, and it is particularly essential for rural and small-town New Brunswick to strengthen their local economies in this way.

My question is for the Minister of Economic Development. When will she initiate this regional approach to economic development in New Brunswick?

[*Translation*]

Hon. Ms. Landry: I am pleased to answer the member's question, because I think it is very important. You know, rural areas are very important for economic growth in New Brunswick, and entrepreneurs from these areas are just as important.

Yesterday, I had the opportunity to rise in the House, and perhaps I was a bit excited, because we have a lot of good results in our annual report. That being said, as you were able to see, I showed that the work done by Opportunities New Brunswick is producing results across the province.

We established a team of people across the province, in northern and southern areas, working directly with our businesses. These people are trying to find ways to increase exports and jobs, and we are getting results in this regard.

Mr. Coon: In its campaign platform, this government committed to establishing locally managed economic development agencies that could play an essential role by facilitating the development of regional economic strategies. When will the minister establish these locally managed economic development agencies, as promised, to initiate regional development plans?

Hon. Ms. Landry: You know, over the last year, we conducted extensive consultations to create our Economic Growth Plan. The government also established the New Brunswick Jobs Board, which is chaired by the Premier himself.

You know, the New Brunswick Jobs Board is working directly with Opportunities New Brunswick to find opportunities in all areas of New Brunswick. Over the last year, we held 22 summits on opportunities we can find across New Brunswick. I could mention opportunities related to blueberries and maple syrup, just to name a few.



These are opportunities we find in rural areas of New Brunswick. I think this shows how important rural areas are for our government and how our government wants to take care of them.

[Original]

Mr. Coon: Rural New Brunswick has borne the brunt of cuts to services through the abandonment of social infrastructure like schools, courthouses, and Service New Brunswick offices. The backbone of rural economies has been undermined for decades by government after government with policies that undermine family farms, woodlot owners, silvicultural workers, and others.

The opportunity to build a low-carbon economy presents a possibility of creating a large and well-trained workforce, much of it located in rural New Brunswick, to develop the biofuel, bioenergy, and renewable energy industries needed for that transition. My question for the Minister of Economic Development is this: Will she work with me to ensure that my bill, the *Green Jobs Act*, will be passed to create the conditions for growth in these sectors?

[Translation]

Hon. Ms. Landry: Thank you for the question. As you know, we are working extremely hard, and we are firmly convinced that we have opportunities across the province to grow the economy. We have convincing and reliable results: 2 965 jobs were created in 2015-16, and this does not include the ones that were created in 2016-17. I think jobs were created all over the province. With our summits, we were able to consult the public. We have an Economic Growth Plan, a plan to reduce the deficit, a 10-year education plan, and a Climate Change Action Plan. We have all the plans and are taking all the necessary steps to grow our economy.

[Original]

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker: Order.

Auditor General's Report

Mr. Fitch: Yesterday, the Minister of Economic Development confirmed that Opportunities New Brunswick has not actually put many New Brunswickers on the job and earning a paycheque. Last week, the Auditor General confirmed that Opportunities New Brunswick has been a failure in another aspect of its mandate, namely, providing that it has implemented her Atcon-prevention recommendations.

In March 2015, Opportunities New Brunswick head Stephen Lund claimed that he would have these Atcon-prevention recommendations in place within six months. In October 2015, the



story changed, with a new target date of March 2016. However, we learned last week that, when the Auditor General attempted to prove whether any of these Atcon-prevention recommendations were truly in place, Opportunities New Brunswick did not seem particularly cooperative. Did the Auditor General's report concern the Minister of Economic Development in any way?

[*Translation*]

Hon. Ms. Landry: I am very happy to answer this question about the goals set by Opportunities New Brunswick. I can say that I am very, very proud of the results announced on December 1, in its annual report. As you know, the opposition seems to be looking and digging into the past; members opposite had been asking for the annual report since July.

I took the liberty of checking what results Invest New Brunswick produced under the former government. Actually, for a three-year period, from 2011 to 2014, the goal was to create 3 050 jobs, but 2 300 jobs were created; this is a rate of 79%. Our government set a goal twice as high as the one originally set for the first year. Therefore, I think that we have convincing results and that our economy is moving forward.

[*Original*]

Mr. Speaker: The time for oral questions has expired.

