

# Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

## Oral Questions



**November 3, 2022**

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[Original]

### FRENCH IMMERSION

**Mr. McKee** (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Mr. Speaker, we are seeing disturbing trends with this government in relation to decision-making without data. It is making decisions based on emotions and not on facts or on evidence, such as when Public Health did not have any evidentiary data to support its decision to remove mask mandates in classrooms or such as when the Minister of Public Safety admits that his assertions on crime are based not on data but on anecdotes.

Yesterday, in defense of the Minister of Public Safety, the Minister of Education seemed to suggest that there is nothing wrong with relying on anecdotal evidence. All we are asking for, Mr. Speaker, are evidence-based decisions. Does the Minister of Education accept the proposition that decisions on education programming should be and must be evidence-based?

**Hon. Mr. Hogan** (Carleton, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Mr. Speaker, I thank the Leader of the Official Opposition for the question. Before I move on to today's question, I want to revert to a question he asked yesterday regarding the...

[Translation]

It is the question regarding the Integrated Service Delivery program in the Francophone sector.

[Original]

(Interjections.)

**Mr. Speaker** (Hon. Mr. Oliver): We will give you an opportunity afterward to respond to that. Proceed.

**Hon. Mr. Hogan** (Carleton, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): I know—I ruined it.

Thank you very much to the member opposite for the question. Of course, we function on a data-driven education system. We make decisions based on data. I make decisions based on logic and data. I am not driven by emotion, and anybody who knows me would know that. It is not that I do not have emotions, Mr. Speaker, but I do not tend to be driven by them. So yes, I believe in data. Thank you very much for the question.

**Mr. McKee** (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Mr. Speaker, early immersion has been proven to be the best way to learn French as a second language. Educational experts have waded into the debate about the French immersion program.

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They are here today, Mr. Speaker. They have offered data and evidence to show that the program has been a success. We know what the Premier thinks of data, thanks to his infamous quote, but surely the Minister of Education, who has a fiduciary duty to children in the education system, is not going to blindly rush into educational program changes that are not evidence-based and could hurt educational outcomes.

Mr. Speaker, French immersion was only reinstated for Grade 1 in 2017. Those students are now in Grade 6. We have not even let them get to Grade 12 to evaluate progress and success. Will the minister stop spinning data, as he has been this week? He says that he makes evidence-based decisions. Well, let's put those biases aside. Will the minister make an evidence-based decision with French immersion?

**Hon. Mr. Hogan** (Carleton, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): I would like to thank the member opposite, once again, for the question. I would also like to acknowledge the presence of Canadian Parents for French and my friend of 42 years, Mr. Collins, who is the Executive Director of Canadian Parents for French.

I know that, together, we all have the same goal, and that goal is to create a world-class education system. In this particular instance, we are talking about the Anglophone education system. We are talking about addressing deficiencies and making an all-inclusive system for all students to succeed in all their subjects. To look at where we need to have changes, to look at where we need to improve, to look at classroom composition issues that have been created through a variety of reasons, to look at the inequity in class size between what we have with our prime classes and with the immersion classes, and to move forward in a comprehensive way where all students will achieve a conversational level of French...

**Mr. Speaker** (Hon. Mr. Oliver): Thank you, minister.

**Mr. McKee** (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Mr. Speaker, I have a hard time believing that when they abolish French immersion, we will be the only officially bilingual province in Canada and the only province that does not have a French immersion program. I mean, if they are going to rely on anecdotal evidence, I will give an example—my wife. My wife is from Red Deer, Alberta, and she went through a French immersion program. She then went to the Université de Moncton and studied common law in French. The program works, Mr. Speaker.

But I will not rely just on anecdotal evidence; I will rely on the facts. We have documents from the Department of Education that show that of the 452 students who took part in oral proficiency testing in 2017-18, 99.8% were at the Intermediate level, 87% were at Intermediate Plus, and 46.7% were at the Advanced level or higher. The program works. It can be improved, and it should be. But why would the minister replace it with a new program that sets a mediocre goal for French proficiency?

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**Hon. Mr. Hogan** (Carleton, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and I thank the member opposite again for the question and the opportunity to talk about the quality education system that we want to create here in New Brunswick, particularly in our Anglophone system. I do not agree that wanting all our children to be able to speak French is a mediocre goal. When we live in a bilingual province, as we have for 50 years now—and Statistics Canada says that 30% of our population is bilingual—I think that we need to look at the practice and at what we are doing. We are consulting, and we are going to transition. We want to ensure that we actually have a bilingual population in Canada. We want to ensure that when our students graduate from our Anglophone system, they can converse in the French language anywhere in the province.

You know, it is personal for me. I have three grandchildren. Two of them are in Grade 1, and one of them will come into this new system. I am not going to do anything that is going to jeopardize their opportunity.

[Translation]

**Mr. McKee** (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Mr. Speaker, it is not just about the goal for French proficiency, which, according to the government, will be mediocre; there are other issues. The New Brunswick Teachers' Association has indicated that it strongly opposes this political decision to change the French immersion program. The government has betrayed people's trust. The education system is currently under pressure, whereas it needs stability. The education system needs time to recover after the last two years, Mr. Speaker.

In light of these concerns from those who are in the classroom with our students, will the minister put this change on hold and prevent further disruptions in the education system?

[Original]

**Hon. Mr. Hogan** (Carleton, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Mr. Speaker, thank you to the member opposite for the question. I think that he makes a very good point in terms of the last three years in education. They have been very challenging, and our teachers have done a stellar job. Our students have learned in spite of a very challenging time, and I want to commend our teachers on both sides for the job that they have done in very challenging circumstances.

I did not say that our goal is mediocre. I believe that is what the official Leader of the Opposition said. What I have said is that we are looking at our Anglophone school system. We want a quality education for all our students. I know that the New Brunswick Teachers' Association is concerned about class size, it is concerned about classroom composition, and it is concerned about the fact that prime classes are full. The behaviour students are there, the students who do not succeed in the immersion program are there, the students who do

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not choose to go into the immersion program are there, and the PLP students are there. Some classes have six or eight...

**Mr. Speaker** (Hon. Mr. Oliver): Thank you, minister.

[Translation]

**Mr. McKee** (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Mr. Speaker, it does not just date back two years. We heard from the commissioners on learning both official languages, who echoed concerns expressed by teachers, namely that decades of ever-changing plans and strategies have created significant instability in the system. In considering their recommendations, the commissioners asked decision makers to keep in mind the tremendous strain that the COVID-19 pandemic has placed on our various departments and institutions.

So, why is the minister not prepared to listen to the voice of reason, to put this decision on hold, and to allow the system to recover after the last two years and after decades of constant changes to the system?

[Original]

**Hon. Mr. Hogan** (Carleton, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Thank you to the member opposite for the question. You know, I spent 35 years in the education system, so when he is talking about constant changes, I have firsthand experience there. In my own personal experience, I dropped French after Grade 10 in high school because we used *Cours moyen de français*. We have been experimenting with French-language instruction for years. We have been trying to address issues in the Anglophone system for years.

[Translation]

I understand that I do not speak perfect French, but I believe I speak it well enough to communicate with Francophones. However, there are times when they do not understand what I am saying.

[Original]

I have the same problem in English sometimes. People do not understand what I am saying, so I try to be clearer. One thing that I have never been accused of in my career is not being reasonable. I think we are looking at what is reasonable here.



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[Translation]

**Mr. McKee** (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Mr. Speaker, the minister has experience with the system, so he must be well informed, and this must not be something new to him. The commissioners McLaughlin and Finn, who published the report, reaffirmed that French immersion has indeed been an effective program. In their report, they wrote this: Our recommendations are about affirming and strengthening rather than rejecting and dismantling.

However, not dismantling the program, but rather strengthening it, is exactly what we are asking. Invest the necessary resources in the program so that everyone has access to it and has the best possible chance of succeeding. Why does the minister not take this advice into account?

[Original]

**Hon. Mr. Hogan** (Carleton, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Thank you to the member opposite for the question. I am not debating the merits of French immersion, and I never have. What I am talking about is the English education system. This is what we want to improve, and this is where we want to focus our work.

We increased the Education budget last year. We are looking at what we want for our Anglophone students in the province. For the life of me, to hear this coming from a party that bounced French immersion around a few times, I do not understand why having a minimal goal of conversational French for all our children can be a bad thing. I really do not. As I was saying in a previous answer, I have three grandchildren. Two have started in Grade 1 immersion, and my granddaughter will start school in two years and be in the new program.

(Interjections.)

**Mr. Speaker** (Hon. Mr. Oliver): Time, minister. I will call time, thank you very much.

**Mr. McKee** (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Mr. Speaker, in 2019, the Auditor General indicated in a report that political interference is destabilizing the education system, and we have never had a clearer example. Since the first day the Premier was elected, French immersion has had a target on its back.

We need stability. Teachers need to get their footing after two years of disruptions due to the pandemic. They are asking for more resources to improve the current state of education. They are telling the government that they are not prepared for more change. Teachers are the ones in the classrooms, and they are the ones we should be listening to. We need to look at the program and figure out what needs to be done to improve it and

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make it better. Will the Premier put his biases aside and resource a proven program with the tools that it needs to make it accessible and make it the best program for all kids in New Brunswick to succeed in French immersion?

**Hon. Mr. Hogan** (Carleton, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, and thank you, again, to the member opposite for the question. As I said, I was in the system for 35 years. I kind of chuckle inside when I hear the Leader of the Opposition talk about making changes for political reasons. I was on the board of directors of the New Brunswick Teachers' Association. The guest for our annual general meeting was the then Minister of Education from when the folks opposite were in power. It was when the government had decided to move French immersion from Grade 3 back to Grade 1. I asked him: Why are you moving it back to Grade 1 when you do not have the data from Grade 3? His answer to me was that it was a political promise. So let's call a spade a spade.

## FRENCH SECOND LANGUAGE

**Mrs. Landry** (Madawaska Les Lacs-Edmundston, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The minister is very popular this morning. I would like to ask him whether he can provide the details of the deployment of the language learning opportunity initiative that was launched in September 2021 in 11 schools and in 2 early learning childcare facilities. Can he provide updated information on the pilot program, including information on testing and evaluation?

**Hon. Mr. Hogan** (Carleton, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would like to thank the member opposite for the question. I do not want to be anecdotal; however, I have received feedback from the people who are involved in these prototypes. We have had them going on throughout the province, including in early childhood learning centres, which will create a really nice transition within our Anglophone school system when our children move into kindergarten and through to Grade 1. We have learned what works really well. We are continuing with our consultations, and we have a plan that we are going to look at.

Some 30% of the schools in New Brunswick do not have French immersion. These students do not get any real French instruction until Grade 4, so we are going to change that. We want to create a system on the Anglophone side that addresses all our issues and, in particular, creates a bilingual, conversational level of French with all our students—at a minimum. We will...

**Mr. Speaker** (Hon. Mr. Oliver): Time, minister.



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[*Translation*]

**Mrs. Landry** (Madawaska Les Lacs-Edmundston, L): Mr. Speaker, in what seems to be an unorthodox approach to curriculum design, the minister launched a pilot program on new approaches to learning French as a second language that is run by administrators and teachers in local schools. Could the minister indicate in which educational institutions these pilot projects were implemented in 2021-22? In addition, where will they be implemented in 2022-23, meaning this year?

[*Original*]

**Hon. Mr. Hogan** (Carleton, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Thank you to the member opposite for the question. As the member is well aware, I do not have the names in front of me right now, but I will take that under advisement and return to the House with the answer as to exactly which schools they are.

I want to reiterate—and I am sure that Canadian Parents for French would agree with me—that we want the best education system for our Anglophone students in the province. Part of that is addressing the inequities that currently exist in our system. Some of the inequities are the classroom composition issues, the behaviours, and the inequities in class size. We see that 20% of our students do not finish the immersion program and 30% of our schools do not offer French. We want to create a quality education system for our Anglophone students, and that includes French as a second language. We want students to be able to communicate with anybody in New Brunswick whenever they want to—at a minimum. That is simply a minimum.

**Mrs. Landry** (Madawaska Les Lacs-Edmundston, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would like to know whether the minister is willing to immediately table in the House all documentation related to the pilot program under the language learning opportunity initiative and all evaluations carried out by the department.

**Hon. Mr. Hogan** (Carleton, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Once again, I return to our goal, which is to improve the Anglophone education system. I did not bring those documents with me, and I will take that under advisement. Certainly, the other side is welcome to request the information.

We really need to look at what we are doing with our students. We want the best opportunities for our students. When we are talking about instruction in French as a second language, it is only a component of what we do with our students. We want them to have enriching opportunities as they go through the transition, as we move into a universal program for all. We want them to be successful, and we want them to have the opportunity to specialize, if they will. We want them to have the most success possible when they go

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forth to university. Our students are some of the best in the world. We at Education want to continue to build on that, and that is what we are going to do. Thank you.

[Translation]

### TAXATION

**Mr. K. Arseneau** (Kent North, G): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. For 50 years, the Irving family and other big corporations have made their revenues disappear into tax havens to avoid paying taxes here in New Brunswick. At the same time, this billionaire family and its businesses have received hundreds of millions of dollars; that is money from honest people who do pay their taxes.

These hundreds of millions have not been invested in our health care system, our schools, our highways, or our social programs, and we are collectively paying the price for it today. I am well aware that these schemes to steal public money were legalized by successive governments. However, as legislators, we are here to look at legislation and amend it. So, my question for the Premier is simple: I understand that it is legal, but is it acceptable from an ethical point of view?

[Original]

**Hon. Mr. Steeves** (Moncton Northwest, Minister of Finance and Treasury Board, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the member across the way for the question. Once again, as I explained in, I think, the economic policy committee, this is under federal jurisdiction. This is not a provincial matter. We do have two staff members who sit on a committee involved in tax avoidance to discover where it could be surfacing and who is doing it.

I do not know where the member got the numbers, but they are interesting. I am sure that the CRA would like to hear this because the CRA is the one that is leading the charge on this. It has the wherewithal and the staff to be able to do it at a proper level. We do not. The question, quite frankly, lies with the CRA and not with the provincial government of New Brunswick. Thank you.

**Mr. K. Arseneau** (Kent North, G): Thank you for not answering my question again.

[Translation]

This is lost revenue, Mr. Speaker. We have lost revenue here in New Brunswick. We have proof of that. We can talk about the \$13.4 million in untaxed revenue through the F.M.A. scheme. Revenues of \$142 million were lost through the IrvCal scheme.

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We are subsidizing this family and its businesses here in New Brunswick. They have access to Crown lands. They get property tax reductions. They get reduced electricity rates. That is happening here in New Brunswick. It is the New Brunswick government, not the federal government.

That is just the tip of the iceberg. So, in light of the revelations of the investigation conducted by reporters Zalac and Poitras, will the Premier commit to putting a moratorium on all direct or indirect subsidies to Irving family businesses and any other businesses that benefit from both tax avoidance and subsidies from taxpayers?

[Original]

**Hon. Mr. Steeves** (Moncton Northwest, Minister of Finance and Treasury Board, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and through you to the member opposite. Certainly, we would encourage all citizens to take advantage of whatever opportunities are out there. If you are from New Brunswick, we want you to take advantage of what is available to you in savings.

Certainly, we would rely once again on our federal partners in the CRA, who are in the tax avoidance working group. If that is what the member is talking about, they are the ones who are investigating it. Chrystia Freeland is the Liberal Finance Minister now. I would suggest that maybe the Green Party team up with some of the Liberals and talk to their federal cousins to find out exactly what is going on. Do you know what? The CRA is involved in this. It is the CRA's business, and the bottom line is that the CRA will come up with an answer, if appropriate.

## POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION

**Mr. K. Chiasson** (Tracadie-Sheila, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Maritime Provinces Higher Education Commission has data showing that New Brunswick is second to last in the country when it comes to students moving on to postsecondary education after high school. Even worse, postsecondary graduation rates have gotten worse over the past 20 years when we compare ourselves to the national average.

We have all heard the announcements—twice now—that government is removing provincial interest rates from student loans after graduation, but we need to double down at the front end to make sure that our students get through the front door. So, the obvious question is to ask the minister if he is aware of this information and what work is being done by him and his department to identify the obstacles that discourage our students from taking the next step to higher education.

**Hon. Mr. Higgs** (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Well, Mr. Speaker, certainly, we want every student to go to the next level in their education process, and we need that more than ever. I attended a function last night on

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trades and mentorship and on moving forward in ways that are encouraging people to get into that industry, because we need trades of all kinds.

I do not know about this specific issue, Mr. Speaker. We will take it under advisement with the department, PETL, and understand if there is an issue here that we can help it resolve. Our goal is to educate, to have people go to the second level of learning and to continue to get involved, in particular, in trades of all kinds because we have such a shortage in that realm. We know that, with our province growing the way that it is today, the shortage is an impediment because we cannot get people in just about every sector. But we are not unique. It is not about just New Brunswick. This situation exists across our entire country. It limits us in our ability to build more houses and in our ability to have more investment in the province, and we want to get to the bottom of it. So we will pursue this, Mr. Speaker.

## STUDENT LOANS

**Mr. K. Chiasson** (Tracadie-Sheila, L): Thank you very much. Seeing as the Premier is going to go to PETL for advisement, I have another question for him so that I can get some more information.

Postsecondary education students are feeling the pinch of the increase in the cost of living. It is to the point where housing—if you can find it—food, and electricity are more expensive than tuition costs. That means that even though students work full-time during the summer, they must max out their student loans in order to get through the year. The Federation of New Brunswick Faculty Associations has identified cost and debt as a major reason for students not going on to college or to university. To give us context, can the minister share with us the average debt load that students face after graduation?

**Hon. Mr. Higgs** (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, thank you for the question. I guess what we have here is kind of a balance, because we know that, right now, students can find work anywhere throughout the summer months. I know that they can find extra work through the winter months, if needed. I know that when I went to university, I did just that, working for the student union building and for Victory Meat Market at that time. So there are opportunities like never before in terms of having supplementary income.

We also took the interest rate to 0%, so student loans are available to anyone and people can go and have access to postsecondary education. But Mr. Speaker, I also know that there is a requirement for students to understand how much money they can spend—not how much money they can get to go to university, but how much money they need to spend while there. I know that comes as a bit of a foreign concept to some, but the idea is that you do not have to spend every cent of your loan. I know that many students are coming out with very large, significant loans, but managing your resources starts at the very beginning—when you graduate.

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**Mr. K. Chiasson** (Tracadie-Sheila, L): Mr. Speaker, because the National Student Loans Service Centre takes parental salaries into account to determine the final amount of a student loan, some families and students have to rely on banks and credit unions to get additional funds to get them through the year. Can the minister share with us what percentage of students have to turn to private financial institutions for a top-up?

**Hon. Mr. Higgs** (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, I cannot give the precise number. Again, we can get that from PETL. But I know what we have found out in terms of some of the programs were in place, whether it be the Student Loan Program and the idea that loans can be interest-free... We saw other programs in place to encourage people to stay here in our province rather than leave when they have graduated.

I also know about a program that we just recently announced, which is the program to train 100 nurses at Beal University. What I learned just today is that the full complement of 100 nurses is now signed up to be educated—imagine. Imagine, Mr. Speaker. We have been working with institutions in the whole area, trying to ramp up the numbers, so that happened in record time.

So, in how many other areas can we do that? People cannot afford to go. We provide the money to go because they do not have the money to do that. So let's find more institutions that can actually deliver the results and deliver them as we need them, because we need them now, Mr. Speaker. We need them, not yesterday, but now. Thank you.

## INCOME TAX

**Mr. Legacy** (Bathurst West-Beresford, L): Mr. Speaker, yesterday, when I asked the Minister of Finance what his thought process was for putting forward the income tax bill and splitting the reductions as he did, he responded with a theory—he almost chanted. I quote:

*It is true that the more you make, the more you will be helped by these tax cuts. But do you know what? The more you make, the more taxes you pay. I do not know, but it is just kind of a coincidence that the more you make, the more taxes you pay. My dad used to say, I love to pay taxes because the more I pay in, the more I am making.*

So here is a simple question for the minister: If he truly believes in his theory that it is so great to pay more taxes because it means you are making more money, then why does he feel the need to give the biggest tax reduction to the highest earners?

**Hon. Mr. Steeves** (Moncton Northwest, Minister of Finance and Treasury Board, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the member opposite for the question. Do you know what? Our most recent tax reductions—these are, like, the third in a row, and we will continue to lower taxes along the way—have been approved by each and every chamber of



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commerce in New Brunswick. The chambers of commerce back this and say that this is a good thing. The chambers of commerce like the fact that our GDP-to-debt ratio is now down to 28. The chambers of commerce like the fact that we are now drawing people, and the medical society is also saying that we are drawing people, which could help us find more doctors and get them here.

Do you know what? We have made cuts in taxes for low-income earners. We have raised the personal amount, the amount before people pay taxes, for low-income earners. We have also helped seniors with the Fuel and Food Benefit. Now, we have to help everybody. We do not have the leisure, as the Liberals do, of picking on one area. We have to help everybody in New Brunswick. We have to help everybody, and that is what we are doing. We are helping the middle class as well as everybody else in New Brunswick.

**Mr. Speaker** (Hon. Mr. Oliver): The time for question period has expired.