

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions



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REGIONAL HEALTH AUTHORITIES

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, L): Mr. Speaker, yesterday we began the debate on *An Act Respecting the Regional Health Authorities*, and we on this side spoke out because this concerns us.

We think that the boards, the RHAs, are important. It is an attack on democracy. Although some of these people were appointed, some of them were also elected. It is a good balance and a good method to have the two types so that if someone needs to be appointed who has a certain expertise, be it in business, in governance, in health care... That person could be a retired doctor, a retired health care worker, or a politician even. Certainly, that is an option for appointing someone to the board. The elected people, on the other hand, take a stand and put their names forward to be considered in an election. If they want to sit on a hospital board, that would be where they would put their names forward. They could bring up local issues from their ridings. The representation would come forward from the concerns and issues that are present in their ridings.

Does the Minister of Health agree with the statement that it is a good mix to have for board governance?

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It is a pleasure for me to get up and address this issue. We have on the floor of the Legislature this reconstruction of the regional health authorities' governance, and we are going to dive deeper into it as we move the process forward. We are stuck on second reading at this point.

But from the standpoint of, again, finding out who the right people are to sit on that board to make sure that the decisions that are made within the RHAs help move health care forward... That is the important part. I have had people contacting me, people who are former doctors, present doctors, people involved in governance. What we have done is engage a search firm, a headhunting firm, to go out and create a matrix of the skill sets that are needed to make sure that we are addressing all parts of governance needed within the RHA system. I think that the member opposite is expressing his concerns, but I can assure him that the matrix will address all the issues.

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, L): Mr. Speaker, he is leaving out an important part, and that is the elected members who were present on those boards. I raised that statement because—do you know what?—that was a statement that the Minister of Health himself made in 2008 when he was in opposition. When there was a major shake-up of the boards in 2008, he said that the notion of removing elected members was “an attack on democracy”. He said that some members are appointed and some elected and that it is “a good method to have the two types”, as I just read for you. Those were his words. He made

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the point very well in 2008. I want to know why his mind has changed so drastically that he now wants to remove elected members from those boards.

It is interesting. He also said in 2008 that nobody from the government had stood up to support that bill. Well, do you know what? Yesterday, we debated for hours and hours, and not one member of the government stood up to support his bill. So can the minister tell us what has changed since 2008?

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Do you know what, Mr. Speaker? If we did not review our positions and sometimes change our minds, then the opposition would say that we are stuck in the mud, that we are not moving forward, and that we cannot get out of our own way. Well, I can tell you this: When we see a problem or an issue, we are ready and prepared to change it.

You know, that is why I told the House yesterday that we are changing... I asked staff to review the changes that were made to eVisitNB. If I stayed stuck in the middle, then those changes would not be addressed. But today, I am pleased to announce that the eVisitNB service levels will revert to the state they were in prior to April 1. That is why you change. That is why you are flexible. That is why you pivot. That is why you do not get stuck in the mud like you guys have been for...

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

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, L): Talk about pivoting, Mr. Speaker. That is quite a pivot. It is thanks to the official opposition having raised the issue that the minister went back and looked and did his homework before signing off on this contract, which he apparently had no involvement in. But he went back and did his homework after we raised that issue.

[*Translation*]

I want to know what has changed since 2008, when the current minister was in opposition. Fairly significant changes were made to the governance of the boards of directors of the regional health authorities. That was when he said eliminating elections for board members was an attack on democracy. He had said that...

[*Original*]

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Mr. Oliver): Order.

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[Translation]

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, L): He had said that it was a good balance to have some members appointed and others elected. According to him, that ensured regional representation with people who could bring up issues to the board. What has changed since 2008 to make the minister oppose this?

[Original]

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Mr. Speaker, once again I am mentioning to the opposition that we made changes to eVisitNB because of the feedback that I received from my colleagues in a direct line. You know, when the sun comes up, the members opposite crow and take credit for it like a rooster.

We are investing \$39.2 million to improve access to primary care, and that includes \$10.4 million for the transformation of primary care. That is so that people will be able to access their physician, nurse practitioner, or somebody within their primary care provider. As we roll out NB Health Link and roll out this additional budget commitment to make sure that people can access their primary care provider, we have been finding that there is a gap with eVisitNB, as we try to move and evolve it, as the pandemic changes and as people get more into having face-to-face contact. That is why we made the changes, Mr. Speaker.

CONTRACT NEGOTIATIONS

Mr. Legacy (Bathurst West-Beresford, L): Mr. Speaker, we heard this morning that conciliators were named in the negotiations between the NBTF and the province. Rallies continue to be organized by teachers pretty much every day across and in every corner of the province, and there is significant concern that this will be a prolonged negotiation. Can we have an update from the minister on the status of negotiations with the NBTF at this time?

Hon. Mr. Steeves (Moncton Northwest, Minister of Finance and Treasury Board, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the member for the question. Yes, the talks are ongoing, absolutely. The update is that the conciliation board has been appointed. The parties are continuing to work together in a structure set out by the *Public Service Labour Relations Act*. For that reason, we cannot comment about what is going on inside there, and as the member would know, we are certainly not going to negotiate here on the floor of the House. The conciliation board has been appointed, and we are taking steps to move ahead with the conciliation process.

Mr. Legacy (Bathurst West-Beresford, L): Mr. Speaker, students, teachers, and parents have been through the wringer over the last few years. Some events were beyond government control—COVID-19, for sure. Some could argue that the management of the pandemic could have been done differently, but we were dealing with a new situation and

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coping as best we could. Those discussions are better left for analysis later on, when preparing for the next situation, should it arise.

But some of the chaos is well within the control of this government—the failed attempt to eliminate French immersion, the changes to governance that are currently being proposed, the lack of effort in recruiting resources, the review of a policy that has barely been implemented, and, now, contract negotiations. Can the minister commit to bargaining in good faith and ending this dispute quickly so that we may get all our educational resources focused on the task at hand, which is teaching our children?

Hon. Mr. Steeves (Moncton Northwest, Minister of Finance and Treasury Board, PC):

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I would agree that, yes, our teachers do invaluable jobs every day. I mean, I grew up in a family of teachers. All three of my sisters are teachers. My mom was a teacher. You know, I was married to a teacher. I understand the business, and I understand how hard it is, with the long hours and the prep work and with just dealing with... I was going to say “with children—like here every day”.

(Interjections.)

Hon. Mr. Steeves (Moncton Northwest, Minister of Finance and Treasury Board, PC): I am not referring to you. He is an honourable member, absolutely.

But we do support the important work of the teachers, and we are looking forward to the conciliation process continuing. The continuation of those meetings, I believe, is actually scheduled for June. Hopefully, there will be good news and reconciliation coming from those meetings. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Legacy (Bathurst West-Beresford, L): Mr. Speaker, we have seen the long-term effects of how this government handles contract negotiations. Despite the signed contracts with the Nurses' Union and CUPE, for example, I doubt that many of these people are happy with how those contracts came to resolution, with their often citing a lack of respect from this government. I have heard several teachers' concerns that this government is deliberately slowing down the process to reach the summer break and use it as an unfair negotiating advantage. Can the minister reduce concerns this morning by clarifying that he will negotiate in good faith and not use the summer break?

Hon. Mr. Steeves (Moncton Northwest, Minister of Finance and Treasury Board, PC): Mr. Speaker, we always—always—negotiate in good faith on every contract.

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[Translation]

SCHOOLS

Mrs. Landry (Madawaska Les Lacs-Edmundston, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As you know, every child should start their school day with a full stomach. Food programs in schools are tremendously beneficial for the academic achievement and mental health of students. Unfortunately, not all children and teenagers have that opportunity. That is why breakfast programs in schools are so valuable, because they aim to ensure that children do not go hungry.

Could the minister tell us how many of the 295 schools in New Brunswick get food delivered for children who need breakfast? Also, how many children benefit from these programs?

Hon. Mr. Hogan (Carleton, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Thank you to the member opposite for her question. There are 296 schools in our province. Right now, 50 schools do not have a food program, 19 in the Francophone sector and 31 in the Anglophone sector. Our primary goal is to ensure that we have food programs in these 50 schools before moving on to other schools. We greatly appreciate the volunteer organizations that help the communities, because it is thanks to them that these students have something to eat. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

Mrs. Landry (Madawaska Les Lacs-Edmundston, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. A healthy breakfast costs \$1.68 per child per day. Could the minister tell us how much additional funding was included in the 2023-24 budget to expand breakfast programs in schools? Is there new funding? Also, how many children in New Brunswick will still not have access to a healthy breakfast in the morning?

Hon. Mr. Hogan (Carleton, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The member opposite knows full well—or perhaps she does not know—that we spend \$2 million to support our food programs in our schools.

Honestly, I have no idea how many students do not eat breakfast at home in the morning.

(Interjection.)

Hon. Mr. Hogan (Carleton, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Exactly; how am I supposed to know that? Come on. If there are problems within families from time to time, the Department of Social Development has to be involved. In any case, we are working to ensure that every student in our province has the food they need to start their day. Thank you.

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Mrs. Landry (Madawaska Les Lacs-Edmundston, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. British Columbia invests \$70 million, Ontario, \$32 million, Quebec, \$50 million, and Alberta, \$20 million; meanwhile, we invest \$2 million, which does not even cover half the schools in New Brunswick.

Mr. Speaker, this government has surpluses totalling millions of dollars. How can the minister justify not investing more in community partnerships and not ensuring that every school—every school—has a breakfast program? Does he not personally believe that every school should be treated equally?

Hon. Mr. Hogan (Carleton, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I do not really understand what “half” means, since I said that 50 schools do not have a food program. That means that more than half of schools have a food program.

It is true that we invest \$2 million in food programs. What has not happened is the federal government coming to the table promising to help young people in Canada; we are still waiting. We are currently working with Food DEPOT to see how to make sure every student in New Brunswick is fed.

ORGAN DONATION

Mr. D'Amours (Edmundston-Madawaska Centre, L): Mr. Speaker, we all know that thousands of Canadians receive an organ or tissue donation each year, which means that there are just as many or even more people on a waiting list. New Brunswick is no exception, and people in our province are waiting. Their lives have been completely turned upside down, and, for some, it is one minute to midnight.

Right now, there are not enough donations to meet the need. Is the Minister of Health prepared to support the bill on deemed consent for organ donation that, once passed and implemented, will change the lives of New Brunswickers and their families?

[Original]

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. We are well aware of the situation here in New Brunswick with respect to tissue and organ donations. Certainly, there are a number of people who are waiting, but there has been tremendous success in the people who have stepped forward. I remember this happening with regard to people receiving donations.

From the standpoint of the discussion that we are going to have this afternoon, I know that this will be coming up in the opposition members' motions. We will have that discussion this afternoon, and at that time, we will see how things shake out in the vote.

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[Translation]

Mr. D'Amours (Edmundston-Madawaska Centre, L): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Just to remind the minister: It is a bill, not a motion, to improve things in New Brunswick.

[Original]

Mr. Speaker, it is important to take the time to listen to a patient's story and hear of the process, from the day that the patient is told about an important medical condition until the day the organ can be received. Organ donation is not just an ordinary gift. It is a gift of health, and for some, it is simply a gift of life. Is the Minister of Health prepared to support presumed organ donation and be the champion on the government side?

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I look at the budget that we defended here and the amount of money that we are putting forward to make sure that primary care is moving forward on access to physicians. This is another one that we are working very closely on with Nova Scotia. Nova Scotia put its bill forward, and it is working on some of the infrastructure to make that item go forward.

I have a speech prepared. Again, I suggest to the member opposite that we have a full discussion this afternoon. There will be two hours in which we can lay out a number of the initiatives that we in New Brunswick are taking. We will have a vote on that particular bill, and we will see the outcome at that point in time.

Mr. D'Amours (Edmundston-Madawaska Centre, L): Mr. Speaker, it is always money before people with this minister and this government, and that is not how it should be. It should be people first in this province.

[Translation]

Mr. Speaker, every year, people die waiting for an organ donation. Signing up for a waiting list is a very long process for some people. We do not necessarily know from birth whether we will have a medical condition at some point in our lives. Is the minister prepared to give a glimmer of hope to those who could eventually need an organ donation by supporting deemed consent?

Mr. Speaker, it is not too complicated. The minister can say that he wants to wait until this afternoon, but it is a very simple question. I recall that his Premier initially said back in 2018-19 that he would make sure full answers were given to simple questions. It is a simple question. Mr. Minister, are you going to support the bill; yes or no?

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[Original]

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): I appreciate the question from across the way. The member opposite always likes to make personal attacks on individuals on this side of the table. Those are the types of political points that the opposition wants to score.

This is a very serious matter. This is a matter that we have taken seriously and that all my colleagues have taken seriously. I know that there are a number of my colleagues who want to speak on this motion as well. That is why I give them the respect to be able to give their thoughts on this matter as well. I know that a number of them have worked very hard and the whole caucus has discussed this at length. There again, Mr. Speaker, I do not want to be disingenuous to my side or to the people who are waiting for donations. I want to have that robust discussion, and I want to include my colleagues in that as well. To me, that is an inclusive government. That is a government of action.

EDUCATION

Mr. Coon (Fredericton South, Leader, G): Mr. Speaker, if the *Education Act* bill passes unamended on Canada Day, the Anglophone school boards will be dissolved. The Premier will have absolute power to change what he wants in the English school system. When the English school boards are reestablished as advisory committees, they will be powerless to stand in his way. What can we expect? A gag order on talking about gender identity in schools, French immersion undermined, discussions on Aboriginal title to land banned from the curriculum. . . The mind reels with the possibilities.

The Minister of Education made the choice to strip the English school boards of their decision-making power. Did the minister take this radical action so that the Premier can have his way with the English school system? If not, why?

Hon. Mr. Hogan (Carleton, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Holy mackerel. The reality is that DEC's, in their current form, employ the superintendent. They have an advisory capacity in a governance model where they have no say over operational issues. We are changing that model. There will still be elected members. They will still have an advisory capacity. They will still have influence on who the superintendent is and over the performance review of the superintendent and how that person is doing.

I want to make something perfectly clear. I have been saying all week that we are going to promote and guarantee the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* in our schools. That includes all students, including the...

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

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Mr. Coon (Fredericton South, Leader, G): Mr. Speaker, sadly, the Premier has repeatedly said in the media that he believes that the English school system is a mess. His comments do a disservice to the hardworking teachers and administrators in our English school system. I fear that his comments will become a self-fulfilling prophecy when he takes control of the English school system.

The Premier wants to turn back the clock to when LGBTQ students were closeted. Look at this *Education Act* bill. It includes legally binding requirements for students to be clean and tidy, to do their homework, and to get to school punctually. Who is going to enforce that? I am surprised that he did not create legal obligations to reinstate fingernail inspections of old. Mr. Speaker, the Premier has run amok. Why does the Minister of Education refuse to protect students in the Anglophone system from the Premier's personal agenda to change the education system?

Hon. Mr. Hogan (Carleton, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I take great offense—great offense—to what the member opposite implied regarding the Premier of this province. If he has something to say to the Premier, he should say it to him himself when he has the opportunity.

I want to assure all the members of the House, the members of the public, and our students that we are going to continue to maintain respectful, safe, and inclusive spaces for all our students while protecting the rights that they have under the charter. I am assuring you because, for some reason, some of the members do not think it is clear that it includes the rights of the 2SLGBTQI+ community. Thank you.

SCHOOLS

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, L): Mr. Speaker, if the government wants to talk about creating safe places for 2SLGBTQAI+ people, why is it reopening the debate on Policy 713? It is another instance where this government is just causing chaos in the system. The government has done that over and over again. I want to know, specifically, when it comes to protecting 2SLGBTQAI+ people, what this government is doing to increase their mental and physical health outcomes? We know that when they are not in a safe space, it creates stress that negatively impacts their mental and physical health. Studies have shown that New Brunswick is far behind in providing those types of services to sexual minorities in the schools and in the province. I want to know this: What services are there for 2SLGBTQAI+ people in the health care sector?

Hon. Mr. Hogan (Carleton, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am not sure how I am supposed to respond to what is available in the health care sector. However, allow me to say again that we are fully committed to respecting and ensuring the rights of all our students, including the 2SLGBTQ+ community.

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That being said, mental health is certainly a major concern in our public school system. Mental health issues have increased since the pandemic. We continue to provide resources. Integrated Service Delivery (ISD) is a perfect example of those resources. Guidance counsellors who are qualified, as that is the requirement, are placed in our schools. They continue to work hard every day with our students to improve their mental health, to give them coping mechanisms, and to create safe environments. Thank you.

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, L): Mr. Speaker, it is worrisome that this government chooses to react to the unhappy and vocal few who are hostile or uncomfortable with the sexual minorities who are present in New Brunswick schools. A dialogue is needed to understand all perspectives, but the members of this government put earplugs in and only listen to those who look and act as they do. Welcoming and accepting sexual minorities will not create more people with sexual diversity. It will simply create a safe and healthy environment for them. As I said, the services that are available in New Brunswick are lacking, and we know that this lack of services negatively affects the health outcomes for sexual minorities. It is evident that this government is not there to stand up for all New Brunswickers when it comes to health care and providing healthy, safe spaces for New Brunswickers. Is this government ready to stand up for all New Brunswickers, to protect all New Brunswickers, and to ensure that they all have access to safe places in schools?

Hon. Mr. Hogan (Carleton, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Mr. Speaker, really? I do not know how many other ways to say it. This government was not protesting. I have said publicly that I do not support vile protests or name calling. I support peaceful protests. I do not understand why the protesters were allowed on the property. I do not understand why their behaviour was condoned. I do know that the organizers were asked whether they would like us to do something about it, and the answer was no.

You know, somehow, there is this idea that we are not going to protect the rights of New Brunswickers, including the marginalized communities or people that look different. When I look around here, I am not seeing a whole lot of people who look like me, so we are going to respect diversity in our schools and in our society. Thank you.

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, L): Mr. Speaker, I do not know how to respond to the statements that this minister is making—seriously, seriously. I am going to move to what he said earlier regarding children in the schools. He said that he does not know how many are going to school hungry. To use his own words, that baffles me. That baffles me—that the Minister of Education does not know the needs of the students in the school system that he manages.

I was taught at a very young age that breakfast was the most important meal of the day and that going to school with a full belly is only going to increase education outcomes for the kids in New Brunswick. That was taught to me very early. We know that we need to increase education outcomes. We need to make sure that we give them the best

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opportunity for success. We know that many go to school hungry. How can he stand up and say that he does not know the needs of his students?

Hon. Mr. Hogan (Carleton, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Again, Mr. Speaker, I did not say that I did not know the needs of the students. All I said is that I do not know how many come from home without having eaten breakfast.

(Interjections.)

Hon. Mr. Hogan (Carleton, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): I should know that—right.

Some students get up late and do not eat breakfast. That does not mean that it is not available in the home. Other students do not have food. That is a major problem. Food security is a serious issue. We know from Maslow's basic needs that a hungry student cannot learn, and that is why we have food programs in our schools. That is why we want to have food programs in the 50 schools that do not currently have them. I am not sure why the honourable member on the other side is baffled by that. And just on a personal note, I have not yet used that word.

[Translation]

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, L): It is obvious that this minister is not up to the task of administering the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. He is creating chaos in a lot of files. We saw that with the French immersion file. We are now seeing it with the Policy 713 file. We are seeing it with the *Education Act*, a bill the minister just tabled. We now see it with the breakfast issue.

The minister says he is there to represent people in the entire province, but 50 schools still do not have access to these services. If we look at the situation, we see that nearly all of the 50 schools are in the northern part of the province. It is thanks to volunteers in these regions that programs can be established when the minister is incapable of doing it himself.

I want to know when this government will stand up for all New Brunswickers, because we are ready to. We will be there in October 2024. Thank you.

[Original]

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Mr. Oliver): Order, please. Order. Members.

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[*Translation*]

Hon. Mr. Hogan (Carleton, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Mr. Speaker, I do not know how many times I am going to have to repeat myself. The truth is that we are working well and working hard for all our students in the province. Perhaps the opposition has all the answers, but I do not believe so. Of these 50 schools, as I said earlier, 19 are in the Francophone sector and 31 are in the Anglophone sector. So, opposition members should base what they say on facts rather than on what they think. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

[*Original*]

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Mr. Oliver): The time for question period is over.