

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions



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SCHOOLS

Ms. Holt (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Mr. Speaker, today is International Day Against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia. It is heartening to see the progressive pride flag flying outside this Assembly as a sign that the people of this Chamber are committed to working to ensure that the rights of 2SLGBTQIA+ people are defended and protected in all aspects of our society. We all have a role to play in counteracting hate and fostering understanding between neighbours. That clearly includes our education system.

There are many facts that I think we need to clarify to have healthy debate and discussion. I am hoping that the Premier can help us make sense of his comments and those of the minister, the advocate, and the department. The department reported that it received three emails against Policy 713. The minister described hundreds of messages on the policy, and yesterday, the member opposite said that there were many more than three. Could the Premier provide clarity and transparency to this House? Exactly how many complaints were received, when, and from where?

Hon. Mr. Hogan (Carleton, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Thank you to the member opposite. It is an important question. Mr. Lamrock asked for a couple of samples. He neglected to say that in his statement. He asked for them up to a certain point in March. Since the drag queen story broke in Moncton and since the SOGI poster was spread across social media, I have received hundreds—hundreds—of emails, voicemails, and vile attacks on social media from people purporting to preach love, tolerance, and acceptance.

On this side of the floor, from where I stand, it is extremely important to ensure that we protect the rights of all children, all persons, and, in particular, the LGBTQ community and the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*. If they want to see how many, I do not have the number, but they can...

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

Ms. Holt (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Could I ask the minister to commit to tabling a full inventory and report on the complaints received?

Hon. Mr. Hogan (Carleton, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would invite the member... If she wants to see what I have received, then she is certainly welcome to submit an RTI. I have a number of petitions on my desk in my office and in my constituency office. I also have a couple of recordings of some voice mails that have been left on my phone in my constituency office. I have had a whole variety of things.

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I guess, when I speak about this... You know, I have spent my whole career teaching students that if you cannot ask a question about something, then there is something wrong. You need to be respectful. What I have discovered through this exercise is that when people do not have something to offer in terms of a concrete argument, they revert to...

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

Ms. Holt (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate the advice to file an RTI. Yesterday I spoke with a journalist who, I believe, had to file three RTIs to get a report that took four years to produce, so I will consider that.

The Premier cited concerns about pronoun and identity information being withheld from parents, and I can understand completely the feeling you get when you send your child out into the world and into the care of others. The Premier characterized the teachers' work—and this is a quote—as purposefully hiding information from parents. I think that does a disservice to the teachers who find themselves confidants to kids who are wrestling with their identity.

Can the Premier help us understand and help the people in this Chamber to understand how many times a child's request for the privacy of their pronouns and identity been granted in New Brunswick since this policy was put in place?

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Thank you for the question. Mr. Speaker, I think that what we have to understand here is the basic principle of what the rights of the parents are and what role they play in education. I think that if we want to ask a question, then the Leader of the Opposition should say whether she believes that schools should have a greater authority, over parents. Does she believe that parents play any role in the upbringing of their children? It is clear what Policy 713 says in relation to not informing the parents. The philosophy in schools is that if parents come in, things will be removed so that the students are not identified.

But I think it is also important to recognize that there is a mechanism in place whereby children can have privacy in a conversation with a school guidance counselor. And if there are issues at home, there is a mechanism in place to ensure that the children have the ability to have their parents and the situation evaluated. That is how our system works, Mr. Speaker. Thank you.

Ms. Holt (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I really appreciate the point that the Premier made at the end. There are mechanisms in place that respect parents' rights and that work with counselors and teachers to make sure that the safety of students and the rights of parents are being balanced. Teachers in our province work really diligently to provide students with appropriate learning opportunities and safe, inclusive, and affirming environments.

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One of the ways that we support teachers in doing this is with training sessions and professional development. That is why there were sessions happening a few weeks ago to help teachers make sure they are using the best language, the best tools, and the best education to have these careful conversations with students and to ensure the wise use of counselors. Can the Premier help us to understand why, if he wants to make sure that parents and kids are protected, teachers have no longer been supported in that education with the pulling of funding to Pride in Education?

Hon. Mr. Hogan (Carleton, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We support all our students, and we provide in-service sessions for our teachers. No funding has been pulled from Pride in Education. As a matter of fact, I just approved funding for a Francophone LGBTQ youth summit early next year. I have received a request from the Anglophone summit that will also be approved. We support our LGBTQ youth, teachers, and parents. We work hard to create harmony, respect, and safe environments in our schools. Hopefully, that translates into our societies. Clearly, the vile attacks against me and my family give me cause to pause and wonder. However, that will not deter me from working hard to see that we provide these in-service training sessions.

Ms. Holt (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I want to get back to the point about the need to help educate and provide clarity to parents about what is happening in schools. Has the Premier consulted with teachers and education experts to understand how Policy 713 is currently being brought to life in schools in New Brunswick?

[Translation]

Hon. Mr. Hogan (Carleton, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. To answer the question from the Leader of the Official Opposition, yes, we have consulted some experts and we will continue to hold consultations. We will consult students, teachers, and experts. We intend to make a few changes to Policy 713, if necessary, over the next week and a half. Thank you very much.

Ms. Holt (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

[Original]

Given the Premier's passion for the parents' right to have a say in the education of their children, will he be directing the Education Minister to revise Bill 46 to ensure that parents and communities have an actual say in education governance?

Hon. Mr. Hogan (Carleton, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you for the question. Parents currently have a say in the

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governance of our schools. The *Education Act* that we brought forward will be discussed in more detail in the economic policy committee once we get through second reading. We will talk about what the actual changes are and what the changes are not, and parents will still have input into our education system because, clearly, we are teaching their children and we want to have their input.

This bill was revised from the original version—the original thought of removing district education councils (DECs) altogether and removing Parent School Support Committees—because we value the contribution of parents. We believe that parents are a key stakeholder and partner in the education of their children in New Brunswick. Thank you.

HOUSING

Ms. Holt (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Mr. Speaker, I would like to connect the two themes from this week. Population growth is not the only reason that we are seeing a housing crisis in New Brunswick. In fact, this crisis started before the pandemic and before noticeable population increases.

Marginalized people, including people with disabilities and members of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community, are much more likely to experience housing insecurity and homelessness in New Brunswick.

[*Translation*]

Marginalized people, including people with disabilities and members of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community, are much more likely to experience housing insecurity here in New Brunswick. Access to secure, supervised, and accessible housing is a challenge.

[*Original*]

We need access to accessible, safe, and supportive housing. Housing can be a platform for health and equity. Will the Premier commit to upholding the principle of inclusive design in the development of housing policies and programs?

Hon. Ms. Green (Fredericton North, Minister of Service New Brunswick, Minister responsible for Housing, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am happy to get up to talk about housing and our vulnerable citizens in New Brunswick and how it is imperative for us, as a government, to consider them as we are putting together our housing strategy for the province. I have had the opportunity to talk a little bit about all the engagement that we are doing with New Brunswickers, with stakeholder groups, and with marginalized groups. At times, when I find out that we have missed a stakeholder group or representative, I reach out and have those meetings because we are not done yet in developing the strategy.

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I have been very clear about this. The strategy was not written before we had our housing summit in May, nor was it written in February. We are working through the details now. We are using all the information that we have collected from the stakeholders. I am not done. There are days that I am not in here because I am out meeting with stakeholders so that I get all the information needed. We are doing this so that we do not miss a group when we are putting our housing strategy together and so that the voices of all New Brunswickers are heard.

Mr. Bourque (Kent South, L): Mr. Speaker, the need for subsidized housing in New Brunswick has never been higher. I can affirm without hesitation that since the rise of inflation, the rise in the cost of living, and especially the sharp increase in rental housing, my constituency office is seeing record numbers of people from all walks of life who want to add their names to the growing list of renting a NB Housing subsidized unit. I know that many of my colleagues are also seeing this in their offices.

We understand that NB Housing cannot quickly build and supply more of its own units. However, what it can do quickly is to incentivize having more of the private and the not-for-profit units that are currently in the market tagged and used for social housing. However, we also hear that the private owners and the not-for-profits find that there are not enough incentives for them to supply more subsidized housing. Will the minister provide more incentives in the private and the not-for-profit sectors to increase social housing? Thank you

Hon. Ms. Green (Fredericton North, Minister of Service New Brunswick, Minister responsible for Housing, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. When I said that everything was on the table when we were looking at producing our housing strategy, I meant everything is on the table.

And we do have programs that incentivize the not-for-profits and the for-profit developers to include affordable housing units within their existing developments and new developments. But we are looking at those programs. We are looking at whether the amount and the way that we put funds forward to have affordable housing units for the population of New Brunswick are adequate and appropriate. We are also looking at the timelines for the distribution of those funds. We are looking at a relationship with our federal counterparts and at how we can make our decisions faster, to make the federal decisions happen faster. Every single thing about housing is on the table right now.

So, yes, member opposite, we are looking at it.

Mr. Bourque (Kent South, L): Thank you. We are clearly hearing that what is currently offered is not enough for the owners and the not-for-profits as of now, so I am glad that the government is looking into it.

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On top of giving better incentives to private owners, the province must also increase its allotment of subsidized units. We will soon be presenting a motion from this side of the House, where we are suggesting important increases of this allotment, to see the needle move. Will the minister augment the number of private and not-for-profit units that are subsidized? That would ease the squeeze immediately. The units are already there in the market. Owners are willing to be part of the solution. The effects of this move will be immediate. There is no faster way to improve the social housing situation in the province. Will the minister act on this now? Thank you.

Hon. Ms. Green (Fredericton North, Minister of Service New Brunswick, Minister responsible for Housing, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It feels a little bit like December 15, when my kids cannot wait to find out what is in the presents that are under the tree. As I said, every single thing is on the table. We do not have the report drafted yet. We are looking into every aspect related to housing in New Brunswick. We are not immune to the fact that we have inflation in New Brunswick, so, of course, we are looking at the numbers on how we are subsidizing units and how we are subsidizing renters to help with the affordability issue. Of course, we want to incentivize more landlords to have affordable housing units. Of course, we are looking at every different way that we are incentivizing to make housing better for New Brunswickers.

This government cares about New Brunswickers. We care about them having a safe roof over their heads and adequate housing, so we are looking at every aspect of housing. I cannot wait to have the report in June and to share it all with you. Then we can talk about how we can make things better.

[Translation]

RADON

Mr. LePage (Restigouche West, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The province currently manages 3 783 public housing units and 797 rural and Indigenous housing units. A media investigation has revealed that over 3 000 of these units have not been tested for radon, the invisible, odourless gas that is the second leading cause of lung cancer in Canada.

Of the 1 444 units tested for radon, 366 have levels that exceed the standards. Yet, during an interview in March, the Minister responsible for Housing said that none of these housing units need remediation, which means that all the work has been done. Can the Minister responsible for Housing confirm to us the number of housing units that will be tested for radon in 2023-24 and in how many remedial work will be done to reduce radon exposure?

[Original]

Hon. Ms. Green (Fredericton North, Minister of Service New Brunswick, Minister responsible for Housing, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. There was a lot of

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discussion about radon in our public housing units in the past. When we discussed it in March, I committed to testing as many units as we possibly could. We think that we can do all of them this year. We are going to attempt to do all of them. We also commit to meeting the Canadian guidelines for radon within these dwellings. I am happy to talk about that again and to reconfirm that commitment. The safety of New Brunswickers and of the people within our public housing units is imperative. We will make every move we possibly can in order to protect individuals. Thank you for bringing that up.

I would like to bring up that the member opposite discussed a house without windows. Can you please talk to me about that so that we can get that fixed?

[Translation]

Mr. LePage (Restigouche West, L): Thank you. This is very encouraging news, and I thank the minister.

[Original]

Health Canada states that exposure to radon is the leading cause of lung cancer after smoking, and the risk of lung cancer due to radon for people who smoke is even higher. New Brunswick has the highest concentration of radon in Canada. Approximately one in five homes tested above Health Canada's action levels.

Sealing drafts and making buildings tighter have had unintended consequences on trapping radon indoors, which makes the problem even worse in energy-efficient buildings. Typical mitigation costs about \$2 500 to \$5 000, and it effectively reduces radon levels by up to 80%. This is a fixable problem, but many homeowners do not test for radon because they cannot afford the cost of mitigation. Given that the province has extended the energy efficiency program, can we see this included in that program?

Hon. Ms. Green (Fredericton North, Minister of Service New Brunswick, Minister responsible for Housing, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. That was very good information to provide about radon. It is an issue here in New Brunswick. We have an interesting geography in our province that does lead to the possibility of radon exposure. Because of the discussions we have had and the commitments we have made... I think you have heard the term "One Team One GNB", which we all employ and which all ministers employ within their departments. We recognize that all New Brunswickers should learn about radon and make decisions on whether to test their own individual dwellings. We were working as a team in the fall to do a marketing campaign so that New Brunswickers can learn about radon and we can support them in making decisions about testing for radon in their homes.

I would also like to say that all the new housing units that we are building will have all the mechanisms in place so that if they are near radon, we can mitigate for that as well. We are making expansions to our building program to ensure that people are safe from radon.

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Mr. Coon (Fredericton South, Leader, G): Mr. Speaker, the Commissioner on Systemic Racism concluded in her report, which was released just before we broke for Christmas last year, that our schools have issues with overt and systemic racism. She noted that the resulting trauma is amplified because of an inability or unwillingness by teachers and principals to address racism. The case of Michael Dymond, a Black teacher in Woodstock, is a case in point. He has experienced so much racism over the nearly 30 years of his teaching career that he had to go off on disability. As one example, the parents of two different students did not want their children to be taught by him because he was a Black teacher. The principal complied and moved the students to a class taught by a White teacher.

The Premier has yet to say anything about the report on systemic racism, so I want to ask him a question. Does the Premier support the transfer of students from a classroom if their parents complain about the race of the teacher?

Hon. Mr. Hogan (Carleton, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As I said, we actively promote inclusive environments for all students and teachers. We have in-service sessions for our teachers. We work with our children. We address instances of hate whenever they are raised. Bullying is a reality in our schools. It has been for as long as I have been involved and, I am sure, for years prior to that. We work on that on a consistent and daily basis. I do not know one principal who refuses to address any instances of bullying. I would be shocked to hear the name of one.

In terms of this particular case, my understanding is that it is before the Human Rights Commission. I have no further comment on that. Thank you.

Mr. Coon (Fredericton South, Leader, G): Well, Mr. Speaker, back in December 2021, the teacher, Mr. Dymond, did file with the Human Rights Commission an extensive and well-documented complaint of systemic racism that had manifested in his school over many years. A year and a half has gone by, and there is yet to be an inquiry into Mr. Dymond's case. Instead, the government has actually hired lawyers to counter Mr. Dymond's well-documented case. His case includes copies of emails and recordings where the N-word slur was used and where there were comments such as: These people should be happy with what they have and just get used to racist remarks. There were also experiences such as being asked some years ago to participate in a slave auction in his school because his administrator said that it would make it seem more realistic. Can you imagine?

Mr. Speaker, it is an appalling case that has left the teacher deeply traumatized and now diagnosed with PTSD and unable to teach. Will the Premier ensure that there is an inquiry into Michael Dymond's case, as provided for in the *Human Rights Act*?

Hon. Mr. Hogan (Carleton, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I certainly do not support any of those comments that the leader of

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the third party referred to this morning, and I also take offense to a lot of the things that his seatmate said about the Premier and me this morning. These comments indicate somehow that I am transphobic and homophobic, which I am not.

These are serious allegations, and they are being looked into by the Human Rights Commission. It is not my place to comment on that.

Mr. Coon (Fredericton South, Leader, G): Mr. Speaker, whenever Michael Dymond complained to his superiors about the racism he was facing as a teacher, he said that retaliation from his superiors was inevitable. When parents complain about racism directed to their children, there is no real guidance for teachers and administrators on how they should address hateful behaviour.

The Premier's decision to release the racism commissioner's report just before the Christmas break and the lack of any response from him at all is quite appalling, really. Ignoring racism does not make it go away. It only further traumatizes its victims. It sends the message, in fact, to students who have been victimized by racism and to teachers such as Michael Dymond who have been experiencing racism throughout their careers that the Premier is uninterested in fighting racism.

Mr. Speaker, can the Premier explain to this House why he sees no urgency in dismantling systemic racism in our schools?

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. You know, I certainly think that there is an urgency in dealing with racism in our province, in our schools, and in our society. That is why we commissioned the first racism report. It is a lengthy report, and there are a lot of recommendations. We are working to find a path through those to address them meaningfully—not just to talk about them and think about them, but to address them meaningfully.

I reference the fact that we all need to be part of that discussion so that we do not tolerate in our society today comments of discrimination and actions of discrimination. I want to make it really clear that I do not tolerate them in one direction or another. It makes no sense in today's society. The very foundation of our province and, in fact, the future of our province are based on diversity, on having new people coming in and on new ways of thinking being integrated parts of our future. We will live together, and we will only do that in harmony together. I, for one, want to move forward, and I know that my colleagues want to move forward. We will address issues directly, Mr. Speaker.

NB HOUSING

Mr. Gauvin (Shediac Bay-Dieppe, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This morning, my colleague from Kent South alluded to the importance of NB Housing, and he is right. I was reminded

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of that again this week. On Monday, I met two people in my office who reminded us how important NB Housing is. Those two ladies lived in horrible situations—in abusive situations at home. They both had the courage to walk away from them. They both fell into addiction. They both had the courage to walk away from that. They were in a shelter that was probably overbooked and understaffed. There are problems there. They both had the courage to walk away from that. Now, they are contemplating having to live in their car.

Can the minister provide us with the number... What is the waiting list for NB Housing in southeastern New Brunswick? Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Hon. Ms. Green (Fredericton North, Minister of Service New Brunswick, Minister responsible for Housing, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I do not have the number for the housing wait list in southeastern New Brunswick. I will be happy to provide that to you. I do not have it in front of me. But it is concerning that the NB Housing list is long. It is very concerning to me, it is very concerning to our party, and it is very concerning to our government.

That is why we made a Minister responsible for Housing. We reconstituted the New Brunswick Housing Corporation. We are putting together a housing strategy that will address issues related to affordability, workforce housing, student housing, and the skilled labour needed to build housing for our province.

We are working as one team. Individual departments are working together with the new New Brunswick Housing Corporation to work on solving our housing crisis here in New Brunswick. The housing crisis is something that has been building for decades, and we are working on putting solutions in place to correct it going forward so that everybody has a safe place to live.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Gauvin (Shediac Bay-Dieppe, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We also have problems with seniors and young retirees who can no longer afford apartments, even if they are on government pensions. Rents have increased by \$300 to \$400 per month, and they simply can no longer afford it. Once the minister has given us the numbers related to the New Brunswick Housing Corporation waiting list, will she be able to tell us when the government will tackle the problem and when it intends to reduce the waiting list to as close to zero as possible? Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[*Original*]

Hon. Ms. Green (Fredericton North, Minister of Service New Brunswick, Minister responsible for Housing, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I feel as though I am talking in a vacuum here. We are doing a housing strategy. I am releasing it next month. We are dealing with everything associated with housing. Everything is on the table. Many of the things that

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you put forward in your housing strategy on Monday will be dealt with in our housing strategy. Mr. Speaker: Housing strategy, in June—probably end of June, because I do not have it all done yet.

We have made a commitment to make improvements to core housing for New Brunswickers. We are looking at affordable housing, workforce housing, student housing—oh my gosh, so much housing, I cannot even think of all the housing—and all the different programs we have associated with it.

Affordability is a key issue, Mr. Speaker. We are looking at our existing programs and whether we need new programs to support affordable housing. The wait list is a concern. We are working on the wait list, and we will have strategies to reduce it.

SCHOOLS

Ms. Holt (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I know that the Premier has not wanted to stand up today, and I can understand why. But, to quote his minister from this morning: If you cannot ask a question, there is something wrong.

I really appreciated the Premier's comments to clarify that he will not tolerate comments of discrimination. Based on the comments that the Premier made yesterday in the scrum—there were many, and I will not specify which—I would like to give him the opportunity to maybe clarify and correct some of the things said in the scrum that go against the comment he just made about discrimination and intolerance.

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, I am not sure whether there was a question in all of that. The points I made yesterday were that we certainly will not tolerate discrimination and that we will not tolerate a situation where kids will be unsafe in the school environment. We will be sure to put all our efforts into making that possible. We will recognize and accept people's differences.

Mr. Speaker, the points I made yesterday and the questions I asked the Leader of the Opposition today about where she places parents and their role... I mean, it seems that there is not a role for parents as I would understand from the Leader of the Opposition's comments. I would also ask the Leader of the Opposition whether she would like to answer the following question: Does she think that there should be a drag story time for young kindergarten, Grade 1, or Grade 2 students? Does she think that is appropriate, Mr. Speaker?

We are dealing with young minds. We are dealing with factors of how we allow children to grow and make decisions when they are able to make decisions. That is why parents play a

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role. But I am interested to know whether the Leader of the Opposition believes that parents have a role.

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