

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions



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[Translation]

EDUCATION

Mr. Savoie (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Good morning.

[Original]

We're very concerned, with the cuts to education in the classroom, Madam Speaker, that the government's choices in the education budget will directly impact children in the classroom negatively, that the government has directed districts to cut \$43 million out of their budgets, that the government takes no responsibility for these cuts—and they are cuts—and that, rather than giving our children the tools they need to succeed, it is lowering the bar and removing resources.

We have a government blaming a school district for laying off librarians due to cuts that this government demanded that it make, saying: Well, this is part of what being a fiscally responsible government looks like.

You are making cuts to classrooms. You are causing job losses. You are lowering assessment standards instead of trying to achieve them. Why are you going after our students?

[Translation]

Hon. Ms. Holt (Fredericton South-Silverwood, Premier; Minister responsible for Official Languages, L): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to talk about education.

[Original]

As I said yesterday, I think that education is the most important responsibility that the provincial government has and the best way to set the course for the future of this province. I'll reiterate what was said yesterday. Our government is putting more money into education. This is net new money to the tune of \$200 million, including \$100 million that's going to districts. As the superintendent confirmed today, his district is receiving more money than it received last year. We've asked for that money to go directly to the classroom to support students in achieving the literacy targets that our government has set and to try to undo the course that their performance was on. The course set by the last government was a decrease in literacy results year over year. We are going to change that by investing \$200 million in teachers and classrooms to stabilize the system and get better results.

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[Translation]

Mr. Savoie (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker.

[Original]

Well, I'm glad that the Premier got on her feet this morning, Madam Speaker, to use her talking points and to continue to try to build a narrative around this. This government needs to listen to teachers. It is the districts that are clearly saying that these cuts are going to affect the classroom. They are going to affect classroom learning. They are going to affect resources that are meant to help these kids.

Now, governments make decisions, Madam Speaker. I'm not denying the fact that this government has the right to make decisions, but it is being told by people in the system that this is negatively impacting them. The reason that we're bringing it forward is to encourage the government and to say this: Look, we have a direction that we're trying to go in here but it's clearly not working.

Yes, we're criticizing this move because we don't want it to negatively impact our kids. The people who work in the system are saying it. Will the government back away from this and ensure that our children are not negatively impacted?

Hon. Ms. Holt (Fredericton South-Silverwood, Premier; Minister responsible for Official Languages, L): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. I think it's really important for the member opposite to consider what he has just said and actually get out and listen to teachers. That's what the team and I did. Last year, I was in more schools than I can count, meeting with principals, teachers, educational assistants, and guidance counsellors. I was sitting in school lunchrooms, in hallways, and in classrooms, hearing directly from teachers about what they need. Do you know what they told me? They need support. They need more adults in the schools. They need more qualified teachers in the classroom.

When we talk to parents, parents tell us that they want to see our kids get the help they need to improve their literacy, learn how to read, and do better in math. By listening to teachers and listening to parents, we came up with investments in education that this province hasn't seen before in order to make sure that we move 150 teachers from offices into classrooms. We set literacy targets that we are going to achieve year after year to strengthen this education system.

[Translation]

Mr. Savoie (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker.

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[Original]

The government members have a direction, but the results that they are being told are clearly saying... They can say all they want about talking with people during the election and so on and so forth, but teachers and districts are saying that this is going to negatively impact learning, Madam Speaker.

You know, the reality is that, if the government wants to take people out of administration roles and put them back into the classroom, there are bumping regulations in unions. Somebody with seniority who has a math degree is going to come in and bump somebody else who has a math degree. The government will not get a net new influx of teachers. What we're trying to explain here is that we have concerns based on what teachers and those in the education system are telling us, but we have government members that feel this: Nope, we're going to build a narrative around this; we're going to tell New Brunswickers how this is going to work, and they are going to believe us.

We're asking for a government that listens and believes what teachers are telling it.

[Translation]

Hon. Ms. Holt (Fredericton South-Silverwood, Premier; Minister responsible for Official Languages, L): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. I will repeat that we listen to teachers. The recommendations come from the feedback of teachers on the ground who work with students every day.

[Original]

There's a concept here that I think is important to point out, because it is about results. We want to be doing things that are going to move the needle on literacy, numeracy, and absenteeism. We set those measures publicly, and we're going to look at the data. That's something that maybe the opposition puts less priority on, but we're going to look at the actual results that come out of this system and we're going to be informed by the performance of the system. So if we see that those targets are being met and we can go further, then we're going to go further. But we've been listening to teachers in classrooms, parents, principals, and experts in education about the need to get qualified teachers back on the ground, supporting students in achieving those goals. We're going to use the data and the evidence to see the results of these efforts, and then we're going to go further.

Mr. Savoie (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Well, it's clear that the Premier is just going to keep sticking to her talking points. For whatever reason, she's deciding to get up rather than let her minister speak. I don't know what is going on there, but we'll see what happens with this question.

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BUDGET

We're very concerned about the cuts to social development. The Child and Youth Advocate slammed this move as a \$47-million cut. These are kids who need intervention before they hit crisis stage. These cuts are impacting children and families when they are at their most vulnerable. Previous governments committed to covering the shortfall, but this government has refused to do so. These cuts could cause an increase in mental health issues and addiction issues and could lower education outcomes. This cut to intervention services will put kids at risk. This cut will lead to worsening outcomes for those who are most desperately in need of intervention. This cut will cause impacts in areas such as health care, mental health, education, and the judicial system. Why is this government going after our vulnerable kids?

Hon. Ms. Miles (Hanwell-New Maryland, Minister of Social Development; Minister responsible for the Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation, L): Madam Speaker, through you to the member opposite, I am so honoured to stand here, not just as the MLA for Hanwell-New Maryland and not just as the Minister of Social Development and the Minister responsible for the Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation, but also because, for the first time in a long time, children and youth are at the centre of conversations in this province, and that's exactly where they should be.

From the minute I took this seat, Madam Speaker, I have travelled through this province. I went three quarters of the way through, meeting with young folks, meeting with staff, and meeting with operators to see what we are doing right, what folks need, what the challenges are, and what people are looking for. When the member opposite talks about cuts to early intervention, \$8.6 million is being directed to early intervention and prevention, because we couldn't agree more that this is where we need to make a targeted investment: in young people, in early intervention and prevention, in things like respite care, and in opportunities such as having 26 more social workers and social work technicians going out, on the ground, to support kids when they need that support.

Mr. Savoie (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Well, you know what? So far, we've had teachers, education professionals, and the Child and Youth Advocate all tell this government that it is going in the wrong direction. The members are clearly not listening, so let's see what they have to say about this one.

We're concerned about the budget cut to Food DEPOT Alimentaire. This cut is to a non-profit that serves food banks, community soup kitchens, afterschool programs, and other organizations in New Brunswick. Of food bank users, over 30% are children and over 7% are seniors. Reliance on food banks—the need for them—is on the rise in New Brunswick. Food insecure children have food insecurity at home. That is why simply having school lunch programs doesn't address the underlying issue. It also does nothing to help the rest

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of the people who suffer from food insecurity. Why, when there is more need than ever, are you cutting funding to food banks?

Hon. Mr. Dornan (Saint John Portland-Simonds, Minister of Health, L): Thank you very much to the member opposite, Madam Speaker. You are correct. There is a growing need for help from the food banks in our communities. I'm very pleased that our government has supported increasing food where it's needed most, in our school system. Breakfast, lunch—that's where people need it the most. But that's not everybody, so we need to help people in our communities.

Food DEPOT Alimentaire has been the recipient of funding on an emergency basis. Last year, it went from \$1 million to \$2 million. We are still in the midst of this year.

We are agreeable to funding, as a start, \$1 million, but I'd like to remind the member opposite that we are also funding individual food banks. We have committed another \$100 000 to help these food banks manage their resources better. If the need occurs down the road, we will look at Food DEPOT Alimentaire. Thank you.

[Translation]

Mr. Weir (Riverview, PC): Thank you, Madam Speaker.

[Original]

I believe we can all agree that many of our government departments are interconnected in their impact on the lives of New Brunswickers. I also believe we can all agree that the concerns our communities have about mental health and addiction are at record levels. Many of those concerns revolve around our young people. That's why the news of a \$47-million cut to child welfare services by the Department of Social Development raises red flags across several departments, chief among them being Addiction and Mental Health Services. If a young person is failed by child welfare, what kind of impact does that have on the child's mental health? How much does that increase the child's risk of future addiction? I would ask the Minister responsible for Addictions and Mental Health Services whether he supports a \$47-million cut to child welfare services to children at risk. Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Ms. Miles (Hanwell-New Maryland, Minister of Social Development; Minister responsible for the Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation, L): Madam Speaker, through you to the member opposite, early intervention and prevention—I couldn't agree more. That's why this government has made a targeted investment of \$8.6 million, and, on top of that, \$10 million to support young folks with complex needs—for consistent support, early intervention and prevention. We have a staff team at Social Development that is—I can't even think of the right word—excited and thrilled to finally have the vehicle, the mechanism, to support kids at the time they need it so that every door is the right door. The *Child and Youth Well-Being Act* is that vehicle. We have a staff team at Social Development

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that is looking forward to finally being able to make decisions that are in the best interests of children when they need those supports in place. Early intervention and prevention, Madam Speaker.

Mr. Weir (Riverview, PC): Thank you, Madam Speaker. In spite of the other minister's response with yada yada yada, hummina, hummina, hummina, \$8.7 million in additions with \$47 million in cuts is not my math, but it might be Liberal math.

As I mentioned, so many government departments are interwoven, and they impact the lives of young New Brunswickers. Whether it is a \$47-million cut to child welfare services by Social Development or a \$43-million cut in education, the Holt government cuts can only have a negative effect on the overall mental health of young New Brunswickers. We have not yet learned how the education cuts will be felt across all school districts, but Anglophone West has lost its librarians and library workers, the very allies our New Brunswick students use in the cause of literacy. Does the Minister responsible for Addictions and Mental Health understand how the loss of these folks' trusted connection to our students will have a negative effect on the overall mental health of our youth?

Hon. Mr. McKee, K.C. (Moncton Centre, Minister of Justice; Attorney General; Minister responsible for Addictions and Mental Health Services; L): Thank you, Madam Speaker, and thank you to the member for Riverview for his questions regarding youth mental health and addictions. I know it's something he cares deeply about, as we all do on this side of the House as well. I thank the Minister of Social Development for carefully explaining today the reasons behind what we're investing in, such as the \$8.6 million in early intervention. I'm also pleased with the work our government is doing to reduce barriers to accessing mental health services, especially for youth. We're continuing to invest in youth wellness hubs. Three have been created, and we're working toward three more across the province. That will be a one-stop shop for youth to access a network of mental health services. We're working with Partners for Youth and the Youth Advisory Council. We're working with Atlantic Wellness in Moncton and the Centre de bénévolat in Caraquet.

We're partnering with a number of service providers. We're listening to stakeholders, in Education and in Social Development, for instance, to get solutions on the ground that meet the needs of youth in New Brunswick.

Mr. Weir (Riverview, PC): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Through you to the minister across the way, I do appreciate the work that's going on in Addictions and Mental Health. Be that as it may, these cuts are affecting youth mental health and addiction. I'd like to share a quote with the minister from the Chair of the Francophone sud district education council.

Michel Côté is quoted in the paper, saying, "The reality is that you cannot cut \$7.1 million from our budget without impacting classrooms".

In the paper, the Chair said he "isn't sure where his district will find \$7.1 million in savings—its share of the \$43-million target". He "warned that current educational

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assistants could be stretched thin and students who need support may have to go without it at times”.

Will the minister agree with me that budget cuts causing students to lose support are budget cuts that adversely affect youth mental health in our system? Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Hon. C. Johnson (Moncton South, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Thank you for the question, to the member opposite. Thank you for this opportunity to talk about how we are working with districts right now to find the best possible ways to invest the resources where they matter most: in the classrooms and in the schools.

We are working with the districts in targeted intervention and targeted investment in educational assistants, academic support teachers, and behavioural intervention mentors because that's where we are hearing that people need the supports the most. Teachers have told us this. Parents have told us this. We are listening, and we are working with districts to make this happen, as we speak. Thank you, Madam Speaker.

BRIDGES

Ms. Conroy (Miramichi East, PC): Madam Speaker, we got a pretty shocking announcement from this government a couple of weeks ago when the Minister of DTI came all the way to Miramichi to inform us that, to cut costs, they decided to remove the sidewalk from the plan for the Centennial Bridge project. This sidewalk is critical for people who have to walk back and forth to work and shop for essentials.

The minister said the department did a study that showed that fewer than 14 people use the bridge. The study would have been done weeks ago when the bridge was still full of snow and sand. With the nicer weather here, and with the new multiplex coming, there are going to be even more people who need to walk the bridge.

The minister's answer to not having a sidewalk is that there will be room on the outside of the white lines—unreal. Madam Speaker, the speed on the bridge is 80 km/h. Suggesting this is absurd, but I can guarantee that people will try to walk outside the white line, and it could be tragic. Not having a sidewalk on the Centennial Bridge is not an option. For the safety of everyone, will the minister please commit today to putting the sidewalk back into the plans for the Centennial Bridge? Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Hon. C. Chiasson (Grand Falls—Vallée-des-Rivières—Saint-Quentin, Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure, L): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker, and thank you for the question. This whole Centennial Bridge project has gone on for quite some time now. What started out as a 10-year project has now become a 12-year project because the previous government dragged its feet. That government actually stopped construction on the bridge for a couple of years, for political reasons. Now, Madam Speaker, it has gone

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from a \$95-million project to a \$195-million project. What's going to happen? We've tendered the work for this summer, so there will be no change to pedestrian access to the bridge during this coming summer. We will be working under the bridge, so there will be no change there. Pedestrians and cyclists will still be able to access the sidewalk this summer.

However, Madam Speaker, next summer and the summer after, the bridge will be closed to traffic as well as to pedestrians. We have worked with the city to look at alternate means of transportation to get these people from one side to the other.

Ms. Conroy (Miramichi East, PC): Thank you, Madam Speaker. I didn't hear anywhere in there that he was going to put the sidewalk back in. Blaming the previous government, when this government said it would put the sidewalk in, is not an option. This seems to be an actual theme of this government.

The changes need to be done, again. We've put the sidewalk back in. We've talked to the previous minister when it was put back in. It needs to go back in for the safety of disabled people and for the safety of everybody who walks the bridge and has to get back and forth. Having no sidewalk on this bridge is not an option. Will the minister please talk to his department and put this sidewalk back into the bridge? Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Hon. C. Chiasson (Grand Falls—Vallée-des-Rivières—Saint-Quentin, Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker. The member opposite is correct. The previous minister—well, two or three ministers ago—announced that there would be a sidewalk on the bridge. However, Madam Speaker, it was never, ever added to the scope of the project, and it was never costed out properly. It was, as one would say, an empty promise, which was very typical of the previous government.

Madam Speaker, if we look at the option of a sidewalk, we see that the actual construction of a sidewalk cannot happen on the bridge structure as it is now. We need all that room for lanes of traffic to meet today's norms for road surfaces. A sidewalk would have to be added to the exterior of the bridge, and that would obviously be a very costly project. The priority right now is to get the rehabilitation of the bridge going and finished so that we can get 6 000 cars to and from work every day.

Ms. Conroy (Miramichi East, PC): Thank you, Madam Speaker. When the government is spending billions of dollars and putting us more in debt, what's \$50 million for the safety of everybody who's going to cross that bridge? There are now two sidewalks on the bridge, one on either side of the highway, so you would think that there has to be enough room to put one sidewalk on either side of that bridge to put people over there. Can the minister please commit to putting a sidewalk on that bridge? Yes or no?

Hon. C. Chiasson (Grand Falls—Vallée-des-Rivières—Saint-Quentin, Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure, L): I find it very ironic, Madam Speaker, that, all of a sudden, the member opposite's an engineer and realizes and understands how much room

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is needed for a lane of traffic. As I said before, there are Canadian standards as to the width of a lane for traffic on a bridge. When we are rehabilitating a bridge, we have to meet those standards. In order to meet those standards, we need the full width of the bridge.

As I said, with the width needed, a sidewalk would have to be an addition, and it would have to be on the outside of the bridge. That is a very complex undertaking, because the arc of the bridge is so high. There's a lot of design work that has to be done. As I said, that was never costed out, and it was never done by the previous government. It was an empty promise. Now, we will work to get people from one side to the other with the—

[*Translation*]

HEALTH

Mr. Coon (Fredericton Lincoln, Leader, G): Thank you, Madam Speaker.

[*Original*]

The following messages are messages I recently received from constituents without health care providers: I've been on a wait list since 2019 for a family doctor, with a child who is one year old. I am unable to see Health Link in times of need, and appointments take up to nine weeks. I was enrolled in NB Health Link in January 2023. I checked the availability of a doctor every day and have done so since last December. In February, the first appointment I could get was in May. This is another one: Health Link books in two-week blocks. I've been trying to book an appointment every two weeks for the last six months—no luck.

Madam Speaker, last week I was asked what ever happened to all the new clinics this government had promised to build so that people can have a doctor. Can the Minister of Health tell me what my constituents are supposed to do besides continue to wait?

Hon. Mr. Dornan (Saint John Portland-Simonds, Minister of Health, L): Madam Speaker, to the member opposite, this is a problem. I agree with you. There are many people today, perhaps in the people's House, who do not have a family doctor, let alone your constituents. It is one of our government's passions to get those people attached. Health Link was put in place as an effort to deal with over 180 000 people without doctors. It's helped some, but not completely. We are attaching more people on the Northside. We have made an effort to attach people on the Southside as well. There is a clinic that is set up primarily for Francophones and that does not have health care providers at present. I accept your challenge. We have not met that goal to have everybody attached within our first six months of government, but we have come a long way, and we will continue working on it. Thank you very much for your encouragement.

Mr. Coon (Fredericton Lincoln, Leader, G): Madam Speaker, there are far more people without a family health care provider in Fredericton than anywhere else in the province. Some 60% of the people on NB Health Link's provincial waiting list live in Fredericton—

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60%. In March, it was announced that 10 internationally trained family doctors were joining our...

(Interjections.)

Mr. Coon (Fredericton Lincoln, Leader, G): Oh, my goodness.

(Interjections.)

Madam Speaker (Hon. Ms. Landry): We will allow you a few more seconds.

Mr. Coon (Fredericton Lincoln, Leader, G): Thank you. In March, it was announced that 10 internationally trained family doctors were joining our health care system, to be deployed in Moncton, Campbellton, Bathurst, and Miramichi.

Last summer, Horizon hired 44 new physicians, and only 1 was assigned to Fredericton, which had just lost 3 family doctors. There is clearly a bias against the capital city by government after government after government, whose members wrongly believe that we get priority treatment for government services. If I am wrong, can the minister explain, when it comes to health care, why priority is given to virtually everywhere except Fredericton?

Hon. Mr. Dornan (Saint John Portland-Simonds, Minister of Health, L): Madam Speaker, to the member opposite, I'm glad to have this opportunity to explain that Fredericton, the Dr. Everett Chalmers Hospital and the community at large, is one of the gems in our crown of health care. There have been recent renovations to the operating room at the DECH. We are working hard to make sure that this is the most modern operating room in the Maritime region.

We are very aware of the significant deficit in primary care in Fredericton. It is one of our tasks. The first practice ready assessment cohort was meant to deal with more of the periphery of the province. There is a second cohort being assessed currently. We are hopeful that people will come to Fredericton. It is a beautiful town. We have a very engaged talent recruitment team that is trying to get people here. The community is very engaged and is trying to bring people here and show them a good quality of life. We have not fixed this yet; I agree with your comments. There is an inappropriate, unusual demand for primary care in the core of Fredericton, and we will work hard to address it.

Mr. Coon (Fredericton Lincoln, Leader, G): Madam Speaker, I am concerned that this bias will continue under the new government because we have a Premier from Fredericton. I fear we will be even less of a priority when it comes to health care if she fears being accused of playing favourites. I ask her to prove me wrong. The Premier has been travelling the province, rebranding existing community health centres as collaborative care clinics, or now, I guess, family health care teams. This, so far, is not solving the health care crisis. It's time to build, build, build, just as she promised. If collaborative care clinics or family health

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care teams are the solution to the crisis in accessing primary health care, can the Premier say, other than the Northside Community Health Centre, how many clinics she will build in Fredericton and when?

Hon. Ms. Holt (Fredericton South-Silverwood, Premier; Minister responsible for Official Languages, L): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Thanks to the member opposite for the question. Thanks for recognizing the challenge of doing things in the Premier's riding since it can sometimes lead to the perception of special treatment.

As the minister said, Fredericton is underserved. It is one of the communities with the highest number of people finding themselves on the wait list for a family doctor. I think it is second only to the Edmundston and Madawaska area. That's one of the reasons that Fredericton was the first place where we announced more people coming off the wait list, took extra patients, added extra resources and health care professionals, expanded the space, and built more space on the Northside. The work does not stop there. Fredericton will continue to be a place where we look for partners who are willing to work with us to build family health care teams on the Southside. We have been having many conversations with family physicians, pharmacists—

FUNDING

Ms. Bockus (Saint Croix, PC): Thank you, Madam Speaker. In all our New Brunswick communities, more and more churches are being impacted by thefts, break-ins, and destructive vandalism. Artifacts of great sentimental value purchased by generations of family members have been stolen, with altars desecrated, vulgarities spray-painted on the walls, and worse.

The previous government proposed allowing churches to apply to the community investment fund for some of the cost of installing security systems. Many of these churches are small and do not have a lot of money for additional expenses. During questioning at main estimates, the RDC minister said that churches were not eligible to apply for CIF grants. Can he tell us why not? What is more community-driven than a church? Where can these churches go for funding?

[Translation]

Hon. Mr. LePage (Restigouche West, Minister of Environment and Climate Change; Minister responsible for the Regional Development Corporation, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker. We certainly understand the security issues that are affecting everyone. Through this program, we are aiming to establish solid criteria to promote development throughout communities.

If one of the establishments the member opposite is referring to is accessible to the whole community, it will be eligible just like all other nonprofit organizations. However, when it comes to something for a religious establishment, unfortunately, it will not be eligible. I

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think that we can eventually debate the issue during the discussion on the motion that the official opposition wants to introduce.

Madam Speaker (Hon. Ms. Landry): Question period is over.