

# Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

## Oral Questions



**June 5, 2025**

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[Translation]

### EDUCATION

**Mr. Savoie** (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): Good afternoon. Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Today, my first questions will be for the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development. I want to talk about her work related to the negotiations with school districts, Madam Speaker.

[Original]

I want to ask the minister, directly. She put out a demand for these districts to come back, and she said: Give us your needs. Tell us your needs, and we will take a look at them. We'll decide whether or not you're going to get that money. I would like to directly ask the minister this: Could she please define for the House exactly what that process is? How is this working for a district to take their demands or, in this case, their asks, and give them to the minister? Is she directly saying yes or no to the demands of the districts? Please inform the House how this specific process is happening with the districts. Thank you, Madam Speaker.

**Hon. C. Johnson** (Moncton South, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker, and thank you to the member opposite for the opportunity to talk about this process. This is the way that it works. In collaboration with the districts, we've asked them to assess which of the resources we asked them to reallocate, they felt had the most impact on the classroom. Remember, we want the resources in the classroom and at the school level. So, line by line, we had all the changes that we had proposed along with a statement on whether it has an impact on the classroom. Districts submitted that to us, with an amount, and, in collaboration, we're looking at those with the deputies, the teams, and the districts. We will land on a number that is fair and equitable for everybody, making sure that the resources are exactly where they need to be, in the classroom, supporting students to increase literacy and numeracy and to reduce chronic absenteeism.

[Translation]

**Mr. Savoie** (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. We're starting to understand the situation a bit more thanks to the minister's answer.

[Original]

We're a little bit closer in our understanding, Madam Speaker. I'm hearing that the districts are making specific demands, but it sounds as though the minister has the final sign-off on whether those demands will be met. We know that the districts can't budget for the

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positions they need until they get approval. Exactly how long is this going to take? It has been weeks now.

This should have been done back in April, or May at the latest. Now, we're going to be heading into the summer months. What is the timeline for this minister to give these school districts certainty so that they know how many people they're going to be able to hire, they know who they're going to be able to hire, and they can plan for the next school year? That's ultimately what this is about. Can the minister tell us the timeline or the deadline that she's imposed on herself to get this done? Thank you.

**Hon. C. Johnson** (Moncton South, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker. To the member opposite, thank you for the opportunity to talk about our vision and our process. We've gotten the plans from all seven districts, so we're very excited about that. That happened this week, and we're analyzing the plans right now, as we speak. We're talking days, probably a week or two, before we land somewhere good. No, I'm not going to be imposing things or giving my final approval. I'm really looking to land somewhere fair in collaboration with the districts, because that's how this government works.

**Mr. Savoie** (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): I'd certainly love to understand the minister's definition of fair. Is it truly the districts that are deciding, or is it this minister, based on what she thinks is fair? I would like to ask the minister to precisely, or more precisely, explain to us what she thinks is fair in terms of the funding these districts are going to get. What does she think is unfair? What does she think they don't deserve, Madam Speaker, or under what conditions do they not deserve to get this funding? I think she needs to get on her feet and explain that to this House. Thank you.

[Translation]

**Hon. C. Johnson** (Moncton South, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker. My definition of fairness is really based on need and impacts. We are making decisions together based on the resources and investments that will have the greatest impact on achieving the goals that we have established for education. There is literacy, numeracy, and the reduction of chronic absenteeism.

So, we are examining each of the investments, and we are evaluating the impacts. We are using evidence to guide our decisions. We are making decisions this way to determine where resources will be allocated to best support young people, in the classroom and at school. That is how we are making decisions collaboratively, and they are fair and equitable.

**Mr. Savoie** (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): Was the situation fair and equitable for the people who lost their jobs?

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[Original]

Was it fair and equal for those people who lost their jobs as a result of the decisions this government is making, Madam Speaker? The members are trying to evade taking responsibility for those decisions. We know that there are people in the Anglophone North School District who are going to lose their jobs as a result of these cuts. That is why we're asking these questions about the precise process this minister is going to use to arrive at a different number than the government originally stated, which was \$43 million. We still don't know what the actual number is going to be, so I'll ask the minister this. The *Education Act* very clearly delineates the powers of the districts. Does she intend to respect the tenets and the requirements of the *Education Act* with respect to the decisions that she's making? Thank you, Madam Speaker.

**Hon. C. Johnson** (Moncton South, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker. I understand that changes can be hard. I recognize that, and I empathize with people who may not be doing exactly what they expected to be doing in September because things change. Things evolve. Students need different types of supports now to learn how to read, how to write, and how to make those connections to be sure that they have a safe space in schools. As we evolve and make these changes, I recognize that that's not always easy, but we're there to support and to find a place for everybody. The education system has room for people to contribute, and we want to keep the people in the system contributing in the best possible way. That's what we're going to do.

**Mr. Savoie** (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): Madam Speaker, here's where I'm going. The DEC's approve the district budgets. What I'm concerned about here is that we have a minister who is trying to centralize power in her ministry and take authority away from the DEC's and the districts. I'm going to ask—

(Interjections.)

**Mr. Savoie** (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): Oh, the Liberals think that's funny, Madam Speaker. When you look at the cuts they're making to mental health supports, when you look at the ways they're putting students at risk, when you look at the job losses, the Liberals over there have the nerve to laugh? The minister can smile all she wants, but teachers are telling us that what this government is doing is wrong. There's nothing funny about this.

I'm going to ask the minister this: In the future, does she have any plans to take power away from the DEC's and the districts by altering the *Education Act*, centralizing power in this government's hands?

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[Translation]

**Hon. C. Johnson** (Moncton South, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Thank you for giving me the opportunity again to talk about our vision of collaboration. We are collaborating with school districts. We respect that they work closely with schools. They know the unique needs in their regions. We respect the reality of districts.

The situation is the same for district education councils, DECs. We are working closely with education councils. We are collaborating with DECs, and we don't want to centralize power. We want to work with our partners.

That is why a little bit more time is needed. That is why we are asking for a little bit more patience. However, it seems that the official opposition is very, very, very impatient to see results very, very, very quickly. As for us, we prefer collaborating with our partners. We have no desire to centralize power. We want to keep working collaboratively with our partners.

[Original]

**Mr. Savoie** (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): It's very clear, Madam Speaker, that the Liberals are saying one thing but doing another. We know that there are teachers very clearly saying this: Do not take these mental health supports away. Do not take these away from students. Do not change the method in which they're being provided.

We know that there are teachers who are being told this: You have five minutes to make a decision on where you want to go. If you do not make that decision in the next five minutes, you will be put at the bottom of the list, and you will not have a choice in where you're going to go.

Does this minister believe that this is collaboration?

**Hon. C. Johnson** (Moncton South, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker. This is exactly why we're collaborating with them. We are listening to people on the ground. We are listening to teachers. We are engaging with teachers. We're engaging with the districts. We are going to make the required changes to make sure that we're stabilizing the classroom. That is our goal.

We want to make sure that the resources we've invested in education—\$200 million more than last year—go exactly where they need to be, which is near the students so that they can learn to read, write, and count. That's the way that we're going to get our literacy and numeracy rates up, because they have been tanking. They have been in decline for the past six years. We're stabilizing those resources to meet those needs. We're doing it in collaboration. We're listening to them, and that is why we're open to making these changes.



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[Translation]

**Mr. Savoie** (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. The government hears nothing and doesn't listen at all.

[Original]

The government members are not listening and not hearing, Madam Speaker. They have lowered the bar on expectations. They have made cuts. There have been job losses. They can't answer specific questions on how they're going to manage this.

Madam Speaker, I've said this before: We're not saying that we're philosophically opposed to the idea that you need qualified teachers in the classroom. We're not philosophically opposed to that. However, teachers are telling us, and I am definitely sure that teachers are telling the members opposite, that this is going at a speed that the system cannot handle.

Teachers are not ready. They are concerned about mental health supports being taken away, and the government members are not listening to them. The reason that we bring this forward is to try to encourage the government members to pause and say: Yes, we're going to listen, and we're going to change our direction. But I'm not hearing that, and teachers are worried.

I'm going to give the minister one more opportunity. Will she commit to teachers that she will change her direction and give them the time they need to implement this properly?

**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. I know the opposition members have been talking about mental health services in schools. I just want to stand up to clarify that services such as those under ISD are not being abolished. It's a framework that will remain in place. The programs will continue to be offered to those kids who need that service.

I've been sitting here listening to these opposition members talk about the centralization of power. They need to look at themselves in the mirror. When they were in government, they brought forward an education Act that was going to abolish district education councils. They wanted to take power into their hands completely. Do you know what? They backed off. They talked after the fact. Then they said: We are just going to let that die on the Order Paper.

We are there. We are listening. The Minister of Education is talking to the members of the district education councils. They are going to come back with a resolution that works for everyone.

I invite the Leader of the Official Opposition to take a look and listen to what his old MLA for Miramichi had to say about the party and the Conservative Party of—

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**Mr. Savoie** (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): There you go, Madam Speaker. There are your tax dollars at work right there. This minister should be listening more attentively to what is being said. Teachers—not us—are saying... Teachers know the system. Under the system that currently exists, which the government is taking away, there are three to five sessions in which a teacher can work with a student to determine what their needs are and get them to where they need to be in terms of supports. The government is changing that.

The minister responsible for mental health is part of changing that to a triage system. Teachers have been told that unless a student is in crisis in every single aspect of their lives, they will not be seen. I have been given this example by somebody who met with the Minister of Education directly. If somebody was sexually assaulted but is not being impacted by it in every aspect of their life, they won't get seen to. However, somebody who is homeless and is being impacted by it will be seen. Can the minister confirm that this is a system they believe in and are going to rest on for our kids?

**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. We are a government that values the health and mental health of all New Brunswickers. We are working very hard. We have an aggressive plan. Our budget put \$20 million more into Health for mental health services. We are ensuring that kids in schools get access to services. We have youth wellness hubs that are going to be expanded across the province. We are working with the schools to make the system more efficient and to make sure students' needs are met.

This is coming from a former government that, again, did not believe in the mental health and well-being of the children of our province. It abolished programs.

We are here. We are listening to stakeholders. We are working very hard to ensure that each and every New Brunswicker has access to mental health services when they need them. That is not changing.

## INFRASTRUCTURE

**Mr. Austin** (Fredericton-Grand Lake, PC): Thank you. Madam Speaker, on February 26, I received an email from the Department of Transportation in relation to a bridge in Newcastle Centre in my riding of Fredericton-Grand Lake. About a month later, on March 21, I had a meeting with the Minister of DTI to discuss that project. In that meeting, I was assured that we would have a definitive response on the future of that bridge and the project by April 7. Well, here we are on June 5. It has been nothing but crickets from the Department of Transportation. I'd like to ask the minister this directly: What do you plan to do with the Newcastle Centre bridge in the riding of Fredericton-Grand Lake?



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**Hon. C. Chiasson** (Grand Falls—Vallée-des-Rivières—Saint-Quentin, Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker. I thank the member opposite for the question. In the last conversation I had with the member opposite, I believe I told him that more information was needed. There was what we would call a... There is a piece of land that sticks out where the bridge is sitting. We don't know whether we will have to take that out. We are doing some investigations with Environment to see whether we will have to take that partial... What is that piece of land called? It sticks out.

(Interjections.)

**Hon. C. Chiasson** (Grand Falls—Vallée-des-Rivières—Saint-Quentin, Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure, L): It's a peninsula. We don't know whether we will have to take that out. We are investigating that. When I have the answers, I will certainly get back to the member. As a matter of fact, we had a request to meet with the mayor of the community. We are going to have that meeting in the near future. As soon as I have the information, you'll have it.

**Mr. Austin** (Fredericton-Grand Lake, PC): Madam Speaker, in the letter I received on February 26, three options were presented by the department. They were very clear and were in writing. One option was to replace the bridge with a brand new bridge at a \$10-million price tag. Given the high cost, I'm not advocating for that, and neither are the local residents, the mayor, or the council. Another option was to upgrade Cedar Street to create a detour and dismantle the bridge altogether. Now, the residents are very worried about that because it would divide the community and the detour would actually cost taxpayers more money over the long term. The third option, which was in writing, was a \$2.8-million single-lane modular bridge. The residents would be more than be happy with that, the mayor and council approve, and I am advocating for it. It's a low-cost and available option.

That's what the department had in writing. What else are they looking for that they hadn't already figured out in the letter dated February 26?

**Hon. C. Chiasson** (Grand Falls—Vallée-des-Rivières—Saint-Quentin, Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker, and thank you to member opposite. I'm not sure he was actually listening when I spoke to him. I spoke about the peninsula and said that, if we have to take it out, the modular bridge will have to be longer. We're investigating that, and that will affect costs, of course. My preference is to do what's going to be best for the community, and I'm more than willing to meet with the council members, mayor, and member opposite to discuss just where we are with this project. It's important to me that we do what's best for the community and what the community is looking for. I'm trying to get all the pertinent information together, and when I do, I will be more than happy to sit down with the member opposite and discuss it. Thank you.

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[Translation]

### ENERGY

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

[Original]

Well, today is World Environment Day. The environment section in the throne speech that this government released earlier in the session said that it was committed to introducing “a provincial program for solar retrofits”. The sun, of course, is a source of energy that runs, well, the world. Plants harness the sun’s energy to produce nourishment to grow, feed us, and create oxygen for us to breathe. This ubiquitous, enduring, and free source of energy can be harnessed to power our homes without emitting pollution or creating toxic wastes in the process. In speaking of the very successful six-year Shediac residential study, the researchers referred to the transformational potential it revealed, with solar power reducing peak demand for the utility and saving money for consumers. Can the Premier tell the House when she will introduce the promised solar retrofit program?

**Hon. Mr. Legacy** (Bathurst, Deputy Premier; Minister of Finance and Treasury Board; Minister responsible for Energy; Minister responsible for the *Right to Information and Protection of Privacy Act*, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker, and thank you to the member opposite for the question. He has brought this up a few times, and we’ve been discussing it a lot. It was part of our platform, and it is part of the work that we’re accomplishing right now. Let’s be mindful that we are six months into our term. It doesn’t have to all be done in the first session, so we’re still working on that. In the meantime, there is still the green home energy program that people can use to get solar energy. There are programs out there to retrofit your homes to get better energy efficiency.

I am glad, though, that the member brought up the Shediac program. We were over to get the results. It was kind of a funny program because NB Power couldn’t really talk about it. That would have impacted the results, since it was a study. Now that the results are in, we can clearly give out some of them. The number one thing that came out of it from the residents I heard from is that they had control over their consumption. That’s going to be very important. That is the future of energy in New Brunswick—for people to be able to control their consumption and keep their bills down.

**Mr. Coon** (Fredericton Lincoln, Leader, G): They will also be able to control their generation and storage so that during power failures, they’ll have a source of electricity. I heard that myself.

Madam Speaker, solar power has the transformational potential to massively contribute to a much healthier environment while providing electricity at a far more affordable cost than

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any other new source of power generation you can think of. It's less expensive than what NB Power currently charges for electricity, so to cut costs, pollution, and greenhouse gas emissions, it's urgent that the promised solar retrofit program is rolled out. The key is to provide access to capital to finance the purchase and installation of the generation and storage technologies, just as is the case in building any kind of generation. With the rollout of the smart grid, we can go from a highly centralized system of generation to one where the generation is distributed and oh so green. Will the Minister of Finance commit to establishing a financing mechanism, with or without NB Power, before the end of this year?

**Hon. Mr. Legacy** (Bathurst, Deputy Premier; Minister of Finance and Treasury Board; Minister responsible for Energy; Minister responsible for the *Right to Information and Protection of Privacy Act*, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker, and thank you again for the question. I'll point out that New Brunswick really has stepped up on energy efficiency. There are a number of investments that have been going on for the past little bit. This year, again, there has been record investment in the heat pump program and various other programs that we, as New Brunswickers, can apply to in order to make our homes efficient. I encourage New Brunswickers to reach out to NB Power and get those advocates in there to find out what would work for them. It's available. New Brunswickers should find out whether they can get that energy efficiency in their homes and working for them. As for now, Efficiency NB is still with NB Power, and it's going to continue to be with NB Power until we move forward on anything else.

## SCHOOLS

**Ms. M. Wilson** (Oromocto-Sunbury, PC): Madam Speaker, in 2023, I was approached by concerned residents of Burton regarding the Oromocto kindergarten to Grade 8 rationalization. A sustainability study by the Anglophone West DEC ran from October 2023 to May 2024. Following public consultation, where the Burton community was very well represented, the DEC recommended building three new K-to-8 schools in Oromocto, effectively closing Burton Elementary.

On June 7, I tabled a petition opposing the closure with over 800 signatures, with 300 more signatures added in the weeks to follow. A letter from the Chair of the Capital Region rural district, dated June 3, expressed strong support for keeping the Burton school open. The entire Burton community, with support from our government and our then-Minister of Education, the member for Woodstock-Hartland, stood up for its school.

To the Minister of Education, did you approve the closure of Burton Elementary? Did you ignore the voices of this rural community?

**Hon. C. Johnson** (Moncton South, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Thank you to the member opposite for that very, very

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specific question. I'm going to need to go back to my team to get that response. I don't have it on hand.

**Ms. M. Wilson** (Oromocto-Sunbury, PC): Just to remind the minister, on December 18, we received a letter from the superintendent stating: The minister has written to the school district with approval of the recommendations by the DEC. Now, I attended all four public meetings in 2024, and the Burton residents were consistently present, engaged, and clear. They want to keep their school. On May 9, despite overwhelming community opposition, the DEC announced the closure of Burton Elementary, a cornerstone of that community since 1961. Children as young as four will now endure long daily bus rides. This decision ignores the will of nearly 3 000 residents in the beautiful community of Burton.

In 2011 and 2015, similar closures were halted. Why not now? During the last election, your Liberal candidate pledged to keep the school open. What changed? Will the minister meet with the Burton committee and reconsider this deeply disappointing decision?

**Hon. C. Johnson** (Moncton South, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker, and thank you to the member opposite for the opportunity to illustrate how this government respects the process and respects everybody's rights within that process. When a DEC makes a recommendation, we listen, as per Policy 409. We are proud to be doing that. If the process needs to change, that may be something that we will look into, but we are following the process, and we are respecting the recommendations that are coming to us.

**Ms. M. Wilson** (Oromocto-Sunbury, PC): Thank you, Madam Speaker. I just want to make it clear that, yes, I understand what the minister is saying, but the minister can overrule the DEC's decision as long as she responds by a certain date, as we did. It's very important. Having respect for this community and the children in the community and keeping the school that has been there since 1961...

Madam Speaker, the Liberal candidate was knocking on doors last fall, saying: I'll save your school. Don't worry. It's because I told her that our government supported the Burton school one hundred percent, our Minister of Education supported it, my government supported it, and so should this government.

**Hon. C. Johnson** (Moncton South, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker, and thank you for the opportunity to illustrate that we do not want to centralize power. We have a process in place that decentralizes these decisions for a reason, and we are going to respect that process.



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### PHYSICIANS

**Ms. M. Johnson** (Carleton-Victoria, PC): Thank you, Madam Speaker. With all the attention being given to collaborative clinics and primary care clinics, I'm disappointed by the lack of attention being given to the existing physicians who have held the front line for these lean years. I've just learned that Carleton North, where we are fortunate to have been granted a collaborative clinic, is losing yet another doctor. Dr. Clay Marco has announced that he will be closing his practice, effective September 8, leaving an additional 2 200 orphaned patients. This brings the grand total to 8 200 patients who will be without primary care in the Carleton North area. My question is this: What concrete measures is the Department of Health taking to retain existing physicians, preventing further patient orphaning, especially in high-needs areas where access to care is already fragile?

**Hon. Mr. Dornan** (Saint John Portland-Simonds, Minister of Health, L): Madam Speaker, to the member opposite, therein lies the problem. In what world is it acceptable that those people are left uncovered when a family doctor—a well-regarded family doctor whom I regard as a friend—who has worked for many years steps aside from a practice? This is why we have promoted collaborative care in Carleton North. The number of people in the clinics there is growing, so if somebody leaves, retires, or gets sick, the patients are cared for. While I regret that the doctor in that community has chosen this time to step aside, it is a reminder that we need to build a robust system of collaborative care clinics that will look after people like his patients. I'm very proud that, moving forward, we will put in teams that look after people, not just in this single clinic but in many clinics. We are committed to caring for the many unattached people in this province.

**Ms. M. Johnson** (Carleton-Victoria, PC): In light of thousands more patients being left without primary care, what immediate and long-term strategies is the government implementing to not only fill these gaps but also make family medicine a sustainable and attractive career path in New Brunswick? What supports can we put in place for these doctors who have held the line all these years while things have been getting leaner and leaner by the day?

**Hon. Mr. Dornan** (Saint John Portland-Simonds, Minister of Health, L): Madam Speaker, to the member opposite, that is exactly what we are doing. We are bringing in supports in the form of other people who are working collaboratively—pharmacists, nurse practitioners, social workers—so that, when somebody leaves, the patients are cared for. You know, to credit that doctor, he is a very good physician. He's done yeoman's work over many years, but that's a pattern of solo practice that is not sustainable. We heard only yesterday that this was going to happen, and we will put in place clinics such as the Carleton North collaborative care clinic or perhaps other clinics in this area to look after these patients. You know, people will leave. We need a system that is more robust and ensures that people



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are looked after when doctors choose to take holidays or vacations or to retire. We're committed to doing that. There will be other senior physicians who will leave us. We need to have in place a system whereby those patients are receiving good care. Thank you.

[*Translation*]

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