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EDUCATION

Ms. M. Johnson (Carleton-Victoria, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): Good morning, Madam Speaker. You know, there are more professional development days, lower literacy targets, students struggling to meet basic academic expectations, and a so-called "free" school lunch program that has raised concerns about food quality and waste. Somehow, members of the Holt government want New Brunswickers to believe that we're moving in the right direction. Parents are being asked to accommodate additional days outside the classroom. Students are falling behind, and, instead of raising the bar, this government is now lowering its expectations. So, can the Minister of Education please explain how less time in the classroom, lower literacy targets, and a school lunch program facing criticism are supposed to set New Brunswick's young people up for success?

[*Translation*]

Hon. C. Johnson (Moncton South, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, L): Madam Speaker, I thank the member opposite for giving me the opportunity to talk about all the great work that is being done now in New Brunswick schools. Since September, we have had a new education plan. This plan will establish the vision for the next 12 years. However, we will not wait 12 years to see if it's working. We have action plans to find out whether improvements are being made throughout the process. The important thing is to take into account where young people are now and ensure that they improve. How will we get there? We will feed them, we will support them, and we will ensure that distractions are set aside. Thank you, Madam Speaker.

[*Original*]

Ms. M. Johnson (Carleton-Victoria, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): According to the government's own website, just 55.3% of Grade 4 English Prime students met their reading expectations in 2025. What is the government's ambitious goal for 2028? It's 56%. Madam Speaker, that would be an improvement of less than one percentage point over three years. It's a very interesting way to tell our students to shoot for the stars. At this rate, nearly half of the Grade 4 English Prime students will still be falling short of reading expectations by 2028. If I've done my math correctly, that means, by the time they get to Grade 12, the improvement will be 2.1% or close. That's a big, big jump.

My question for the Minister of Education is quite simple. Does she genuinely believe that moving from 55.3% to 56% in three years is acceptable progress? What's her plan for the thousands of students who will continue to fall behind?

Hon. C. Johnson (Moncton South, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, L): Madam Speaker, I'm happy to talk about this again because it's important. Clearly, some

people are having trouble understanding. We are focused on improvement, so we need to track in the right direction. To do that, we start with a baseline and then invest. We invest in making sure students are well fed and supported. We are investing in education assistants, academic support teachers, and resource teachers. Then we will be tracking in the right direction. We are focused on improvements, on supports, and on setting distractions aside. With this very specific plan, we will see improvements. Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Ms. M. Johnson (Carleton-Victoria, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): Madam Speaker, it's not only parents and educators raising concerns about literacy rates in this province but also the child and youth advocate. He has questioned whether the government's new targets will deliver improvements quickly enough. He has emphasized the urgency of addressing the underlying causes of poor literacy outcomes, which include classroom composition and a lack of early intervention and kindergarten readiness. Government members have clearly demonstrated faith and confidence in the child and youth advocate and have even expanded his responsibilities to include mental health.

Why is it that when the same advocate raises serious concerns about literacy targets and whether this government is doing enough to improve educational outcomes for New Brunswick's children… Those concerns deserve more than acknowledgement. Can the minister please explain why her government believes its proposed pace of improvement is sufficient when the child and youth advocate has publicly questioned whether it is fast enough?

Hon. C. Johnson (Moncton South, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, L): Madam Speaker, thank you to the member opposite for bringing up the child and youth advocate, because he is thrilled about our updated policy on removing distractions from schools. He asked and advocated for that policy, and we listened and delivered. We are removing distractions so that, from bell-to-bell, students can focus on learning, literacy, and numeracy. They will also work on social interaction. They will have more opportunities for those interactions because they will be focusing on each other. The child and youth advocate is really happy about that, and so are we. Thank you.

Mr. Lee (Fundy-The Isles-Saint John Lorneville, PC): Thank you, Madam Speaker. On June 12, the Minister of Post-Secondary Education and Training proudly reported that New Brunswick's neither in employment nor in education or training (NEET) rate had dropped an incremental amount, from 18.2% to 15.7%. However, New Brunswick's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) results have declined sharply, and the Auditor General has warned that literacy failures are undermining workforce readiness, literacy interventions are inconsistent, assessments are unreliable, and students are leaving school without foundational skills.

When a region's population is undereducated, it will be overrepresented in NEET. The problem is not local. It is systemic. Here's my question: Will the minister acknowledge that

the province's NEET strategy is failing? For example, Saint John has a rate 30% higher than the national average because the education system is producing graduates who cannot meet national literacy and workforce standards. Can the minister explain why this crisis was omitted from his statement?

[*Translation*]

Hon. Mr. D'Amours (Edmundston—Vallée-des-Rivières, Minister of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour; Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs; Minister responsible for Immigration; Minister responsible for Military Affairs; Minister responsible for the Research and Productivity Council, L): Minister responsible for Military Affairs; Minister responsible for the Research and Productivity Council, L): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker.

[*Original*]

First of all, I would like to thank my new critic because this is the first time I have received a question from any of my critics.

[*Translation*]

Thank you very much.

[*Original*]

I really appreciate it.

[*Translation*]

Madam Speaker, I have been waiting since January 2025; I was looking forward to an opportunity like this. This file is very important, Madam Speaker. With respect to young people in our province who are currently unemployed, uneducated, and not in training, we have worked very hard and we have improved things in the province. Madam Speaker, that is one thing. It won't all be fixed overnight. We have had serious discussions with our post-secondary institutions, our colleges and universities. We have also had discussions with businesspeople and community groups in the province. Our goal is to improve things. Madam Speaker, things are improving in our province, and they will continue to improve.

[*Original*]

Mr. Lee (Fundy-The Isles-Saint John Lorneville, PC): Thank you, Madam Speaker. In Volume I of his 2026 report, the Auditor General warned that New Brunswick's literacy outcomes are so weak that they threaten the province's social cohesion, workforce readiness, and long-term economic stability. He stated plainly that "without a good foundation in literacy, all of our other efforts will be compromised." That's on page 30. Yet,

the Minister of PETL celebrates a NEET rate of 15.7% as progress even though 15 500 young adults between the ages of 20 and 29 are not in school, not working, and not training. When literacy is failing on this scale, NEET rates rise and the province's future workforce shrinks. The minister's own statement says that NEET youth are "crucial to New Brunswick's future success." This is my question: As the province's collapsing literacy outcomes are directly feeding the NEET pipeline, what specific cross-departmental interventions has PETL demanded from EECD to stop literacy failures from driving long-term workforce detachment?

[*Translation*]

Hon. Mr. D'Amours (Edmundston—Vallée-des-Rivières, Minister of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour; Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs; Minister responsible for Immigration; Minister responsible for Military Affairs; Minister responsible for the Research and Productivity Council, L): Minister responsible for Military Affairs; Minister responsible for the Research and Productivity Council, L): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. I again want to thank my colleague opposite for his question. Madam Speaker, the data will improve. The number of young people who are currently unemployed and without training or education in this age group is continuing to go down. The situation is much better than what the member opposite is describing.

Also note that we are working with community organizations, the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, our colleges and universities, and businesses in our province.

Madam Speaker, this is another important thing that clearly shows we want to improve things even more. Over the past few weeks, I had the opportunity to make the announcement, with the Premier, on the elimination of tuition for apprenticeship training. Madam Speaker, being able to acquire skill sets in specialized trades is very important. However, our young people must be enabled to do so. Therefore, we will continue to do things like this, Madam Speaker.

[*Original*]

Mr. Lee (Fundy-The Isles-Saint John Lorneville, PC): Thank you, Madam Speaker. The Saint John NEET report makes it painfully clear that youth in that city stay NEET longer and face lifelong risks of poverty and exclusion, yet the minister's report pretends the crisis doesn't exist. The Auditor General found that government departments are working in silos, literacy interventions are inconsistent, and no one is accountable for long-term youth outcomes.

Meanwhile, the Urban Youth Employment/Education Services program (UYES!), one of the most successful interventions, was allowed to end without a replacement. Saint John didn't fall behind by accident. It fell behind because the government let it. Why has the minister

allowed Saint John's NEET rate to remain catastrophically higher than the national average? Will he admit that the government's failure to sustain improvement programs like UYES! has directly worsened youth detachment in that region?

[*Translation*]

Hon. Mr. D'Amours (Edmundston—Vallée-des-Rivières, Minister of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour; Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs; Minister responsible for Immigration; Minister responsible for Military Affairs; Minister responsible for the Research and Productivity Council, L): Minister responsible for Military Affairs; Minister responsible for the Research and Productivity Council, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker. If we want to make a difference to our young people's lives and make things better for them, we need to provide jobs. Training is certainly… We are working with the community colleges and our universities. However, Madam Speaker, jobs are needed.

I think my colleague opposite will understand that, this week, the provincial government, the federal government, and businesses made a huge collaborative effort on employment to make close to half a billion dollars in investments in the Saint John region. Why, Madam Speaker? To create good jobs. Saint John will benefit from these investments. Madam Speaker, our young people will certainly have opportunities. What did the former government do? Absolutely nothing. We are taking action. We're making sure that young people have good jobs.

[*Original*]

HEALTH CARE

Mr. Hogan (Woodstock-Hartland, PC): Thank you, Madam Speaker. My question this morning is for the Minister of Health. It is related to hospitals and the failures of the minister's government and his Premier. I know better than to ask the Premier to rise, because we've all watched how she only steps in if there are good-news announcements. For everything else, she sends out the Health Minister to take a beating. He must be getting fed up. However, I digress.

The latest episode involves the Holt government, Vitalité Health Network, and the issue of nurse practitioners being temporarily moved from clinics to the Campbellton hospital. On Tuesday, we learned that the Premier has directed Vitalité to get more creative in how it staffs ERs. Will the Health Minister please rise this morning and try to explain what the Premier means when she says "get more creative"?

Hon. Mr. Dornan (Saint John Portland-Simonds, Minister of Health, L): "I think they are a good idea. They've been around for quite a while and they work well in the communities where they're in and up and running." That's a quote from the member opposite. These are collaborative care clinics, and we value collaborative care clinics. They've been a

cornerstone of what we do here in New Brunswick, so we need nurses who are working in collaborative care clinics to stay working in collaborative care clinics. This was a direction we gave to the folks who run Vitalité in the Campbellton area, and they accept this. They will do this. We want them to do something that does not include travel nurses. These are creative administrators—I grant them that. They will find a way to keep our ERs open, our critical care areas open, and our collaborative care clinics up and running, as we have directed. Thank you very much, Madam Speaker.

Mr. Hogan (Woodstock-Hartland, PC): Thank you, Madam Speaker. I didn't really hear an answer about what being more creative means. I wasn't aware that the Premier had any experience in staffing hospital ERs, but clearly, she must have some ideas if she believes that there's a more creative alternative to the status quo. I hope she's not suggesting that Vitalité draw inspiration from how the Holt government got creative in staffing school libraries by firing librarians or how the Holt government got creative in staffing the veterinary program by firing vets. New Brunswickers really can't stand much more of that sort of Holt government creativity. Perhaps the Health Minister knows of some qualifications the Premier has to her credit when it comes to the matter of staffing ERs more creatively. If so, will he share that with the House? If not, will he just tell the House that his boss doesn't really know what she's talking about?

Hon. Mr. Dornan (Saint John Portland-Simonds, Minister of Health, L): Madam Speaker, we have hired over 179 net new doctors all across this province. We have put Practice Ready Assessment doctors in Campbellton. We have hired over 900 nurses. I think that's action. We are asking our colleagues, our experts in health care at Vitalité, to develop ways to staff our ERs, our family practice clinics, and our collaborative care clinics, and I am pretty confident that they're up to that task. Thank you for allowing me to speak about these very positive points.

Mr. Hogan (Woodstock-Hartland, PC): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Those numbers don't add up with the number of people who have been removed from the waiting list. I wait with bated breath to see how that's going to add up and the math is going to work, because currently, the math doesn't work. The Health Minister has a medical degree, and the head of Vitalité has a medical degree. As I understand it, obtaining a medical degree in Canada takes many years. Starting at university, the entire process to become an independent practicing physician can take anywhere from 8 years to 12 or 15 years, so between the two of them, the Health Minister and the head of Vitalité have somewhere around two decades of education. One would hope that they would know what they're talking about.

Enter the Premier. In her biography, there's no mention of any medical training. What we have are two doctors with two to three decades of schooling and years of experience, versus someone who has an opinion and little else. In his opinion, based on his decades of schooling and experience, does the Health Minister believe there's a more creative way to staff our emergency rooms?

Hon. Mr. Dornan (Saint John Portland-Simonds, Minister of Health, L): Madam Speaker, to the member opposite, thank you very much for recognizing my insight. I have worked and I've been in charge of an emergency department, and I know that the CEO of Vitalité has also worked in the field. She has a good team behind her, and I have confidence that, through the Board Chair and the CEO, they will find a solution for the Campbellton ER. You know, this is not micromanaging on my part or the Premier's part. We gave them clear directions: Support the collaborative care clinics that the member opposite recognizes are good. We have attached over 30 000 people since we started these collaborative care clinics, and we have 179 new physicians who will attach people. Thank you very much for the recognition.

VETERINARIANS

Ms. Scott-Wallace (Sussex-Three Rivers, PC): Thank you, Madam Speaker. I'm going to cut right to the chase. Last March, this government didn't think twice about hitting farmers where it hurt by announcing the elimination of provincial field veterinarians across the province. You would think, after the outrage that decision caused, that the Minister of Agriculture might have learned a thing or two, but apparently, he did not. In this week's 29-page throne speech, farmers barely got a mention, aside from another promised Agriculture Growth Action Plan. There was not a single word about cancelling vet services. There was not a single word about the future that lies ahead for farmers in just five months' time, when field vets will no longer be employed by the province. Madam Speaker, the minister and this Premier should be ashamed. How can New Brunswick's agricultural sector have any trust in this government when it can't even acknowledge the very farmers it harmed?

[*Translation*]

Hon. Mr. Finnigan (Kent North, Minister of Agriculture, Aquaculture and Fisheries, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak to the House with an update on the transfer of public service veterinarians. Madam Speaker, on September 2, Carleton AgriSolutions, a New Brunswick agricultural business with over 80 years of service to the farming community, announced its intention to assume responsibility for large animal veterinary services in the province. It also announced a memorandum of understanding with provincial veterinarians to assume the responsibility.

Carleton AgriSolutions has deep roots in Carleton County. I think my colleague, the Leader of the Official Opposition, would agree with me that this is a very reputable company that has the support of farmers in the province. We are very happy that it's now providing the service. The addition of veterinary care…

[*Original*]

Ms. Scott-Wallace (Sussex-Three Rivers, PC): Madam Speaker, for roughly 220 days, New Brunswick farmers have been treated like an afterthought. They pleaded. They petitioned. They protested. What did they get from this government? This summer, a private Carleton County business, veterinarians, the Agricultural Alliance, and its member farmers took matters into their own hands to fix a mess they did not create. Notably, Madam Speaker, neither the Department of Agriculture nor its minister were invited to that announcement. He cannot take credit for that now. Since farmers have been left to do the heavy lifting here, perhaps the minister could do the very bare minimum. Will the minister finally give New Brunswickers the courtesy of a real update? We need to know the details on what has transpired in the field vet file since this Legislature sat last spring.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Mr. Finnigan (Kent North, Minister of Agriculture, Aquaculture and Fisheries, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Since we announced the transfer of veterinary services to the private sector, like the other provinces, except for Newfoundland and Labrador, have done, we have seen a lot of interest from people who wanted the opportunity to provide this service because they weren't able to do so before.

Even in April, just after the announcement, we welcomed big businesses, including Carleton AgriSolutions. I personally met with representatives from the business last April. We had a good discussion. They wanted to get the numbers to establish a business plan. Throughout the summer, my department worked with them to establish a business plan. We were unable to share any details because we had to protect confidential information. That's why we weren't able…

However, fortunately, on September 2, the business told us that it would make the announcement. Therefore, we let it do so. Often, Madam Speaker, the best thing the government can do is to get out of the way and give businesses the opportunity to take over. Thank you.

[*Original*]

Ms. Scott-Wallace (Sussex-Three Rivers, PC): Thank you, Madam Speaker. I'm so glad to hear that the minister let them make that announcement. That was wonderful. Farmers, vets, and private businesses have stepped up to protect our agricultural industry and the food on our tables. Now, let's talk dollars and cents, since this Premier and her minister decided to slash and burn vet services last March, showing complete disrespect for our farmers. They claimed that cutting provincial vets and lab services would save taxpayers $4 million per year. Then, they backtracked, saving the lab and its staff after realizing the obvious animal and public health implications. Now, they are committing $1.2 million to

subsidize vet travel, with farmers responsible for submitting claims and the department left to administer a whole new process.

Madam Speaker, the math ain't mathing. That seems to be a trend today. I will ask the minister very simply: After all the backtracking, new spending, and absolute chaos, how much is this government actually saving by cutting provincial vet services? I dare say it's not saving a nickel.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Mr. Finnigan (Kent North, Minister of Agriculture, Aquaculture and Fisheries, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker.

[*Original*]

To support the transition, the government has invested up to $1.2 million in the New Brunswick veterinary services assistance program. The new program will provide financial assistance for travel costs associated with eligible veterinary services to food and fur producers. The focus is on supporting rural and underserved regions of the province where significant travel is often required by veterinary practitioners. The department has engaged with industry and will continue to do so over the coming months to finalize eligibility requirements and other administrative details of the program, which will be in place by April 1.

Through our partners with the Department of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour, our government will also provide up to $50 000 annually through the new food production veterinary training support program. In addition, Madam Speaker, funds will be available to support the recruitment and retention of large—

SMALL BUSINESSES

Ms. M. Wilson (Oromocto-Sunbury, PC): Madam Speaker, when New Brunswick businesses have raised concerns about the impact of tariffs, the Holt government's response has been to tell them to call Opportunities New Brunswick. We are also told that discretionary funding is available through ONB, the Regional Development Corporation, Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour, and Agriculture, Aquaculture and Fisheries. However, New Brunswickers deserve to know whether this is actually new funding specifically allocated to respond to tariffs or whether money is simply being redirected from existing programs. More importantly, how much of that money is actually reaching our small businesses?

Madam Speaker, can the minister tell this House how many businesses have contacted ONB for tariff-related assistance, and how many have actually received financial support? How much funding has been made available, and how much has been distributed? Of those dollars, how much has gone directly to small businesses rather than our larger exporters?

Hon. Mr. Randall (Fredericton North, Minister responsible for Opportunities NB; Minister responsible for Economic Development and Small Business; Minister responsible for NB Liquor and Cannabis NB, Minister responsible for the *Regulatory Accountability and Reporting Act,* L): Minister responsible for the *Regulatory Accountability and Reporting Act,* L): I want to thank the member opposite for highlighting the importance of small businesses, especially with this being Small Business Week. I also want to point out that, last session, official opposition members were united in voting against small businesses. In the midst of a tariff crisis, they were united in saying no to giving New Brunswick businesses the investments they needed. We enabled the best tariff-response program in the country, allowing neighbours to help neighbours by investing in each other. This program, where the minimum investment for New Brunswickers is $1 000, will build stronger businesses and start businesses, and the opposition took that moment to say no. It is accessible to all New Brunswick business owners, and the official opposition members said no.

I will just add that, to support that change to the SBITC, Opportunities New Brunswick changed its entire program to build resiliency and productivity and to deliver better export support for New Brunswick's small businesses. Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Ms. M. Wilson (Oromocto-Sunbury, PC): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Maybe the minister can answer my question at a later date, maybe tomorrow. During Small Business Week, perhaps government members should be asking themselves a very important question: Are we making New Brunswick a competitive place to own and operate a small business? Our provincial small business corporate tax rate is 2.5%, compared to 1% in Prince Edward Island and 1.5% in Nova Scotia. Newfoundland is reducing its rate to 1%, and Quebec's is at 2.2%. Our rate is the highest east of Ontario. New Brunswick's general corporate tax rate of 14% applies to taxable income above $500 000, while Nova Scotia's small business threshold is $700 000 and Prince Edward Island's is $600 000.

At a time when our businesses are struggling with tariffs, rising costs, and economic uncertainty, we are asking them to compete with businesses in neighbouring provinces that offer more favourable tax treatments. Madam Speaker, will the Holt government commit to reducing New Brunswick's small business corporate tax rate and increasing the $500 000 threshold so our businesses—

Hon. Mr. Randall (Fredericton North, Minister responsible for Opportunities NB; Minister responsible for Economic Development and Small Business; Minister responsible for NB Liquor and Cannabis NB, Minister responsible for the *Regulatory Accountability and Reporting Act,* L): Minister responsible for the *Regulatory Accountability and Reporting Act,* L): I'm really happy to hear words like "competitive" and "resilient". It seems as though my critic opposite has read our economic development plan, *Building a Competitive and Resilient New Brunswick.* I'm very happy that she's been engaging in that work.

I do want to point out to the member opposite that we, in fact, have the strongest program in the country to support business start-ups and business growth. That is called the small business investor tax credit. It allows individuals in this province to invest in their neighbours, and the members opposite said: Do you know what? We don't want that. We don't want competitive and resilient businesses in this province. We're going to vote no. At a time when New Brunswickers needed support from the business community and needed investments from their neighbours, the members opposite said: No, we aren't interested.

It's difficult for me to hear from the members opposite that we aren't doing anything. We have the best program in the country to support our small and medium-size businesses.

Ms. M. Wilson (Oromocto-Sunbury, PC): So, no answer again, Madam Speaker. Thank you to the member opposite. This is Small Business Week across Canada, and while we celebrate the tremendous contributions of our small business owners, many are struggling with the economic fallout from President Trump's tariffs. We recognize that tariffs are a national problem, and the majority of financial assistance must come from Ottawa.

The federal government has committed funding through ACOA and other programs to support exporters and to help businesses diversify into new markets. However, the Canadian Federation of Independent Business is telling Ottawa that these programs are simply not designed to meet the needs of smaller businesses experiencing reduced economic activity.

Madam Speaker, my question to the Minister responsible for Economic Development and Small Business is this: What is your government telling your federal Liberal bosses about the need for programs that support all New Brunswick businesses, not just our major exporters? Are you advocating for meaningful cost relief, more accessible funding, and changes to federal programs so that our small business owners and businesses are not left behind?

Hon. Ms. Holt (Fredericton South-Silverwood, Premier; Minister responsible for Official Languages, L): Thank you very much. Thank you very much to the member opposite. I know that the member opposite cares very deeply about small businesses. She and I had the chance to work side by side when I was at the chamber of commerce and she was with the CFIB. So it's unfortunate that she is part of the Higgs-Allain team that starved economic development in this province for six years, reducing the Opportunities New Brunswick budget and saying no to every project that came across their desk. Our government members have been out there every day, standing alongside small businesses in this province with an ambitious economic development strategy and a new market diversification strategy.

To the member's question, we are attracting investment from the federal government to the tune of $463 million in Port Saint John, as the member for Kings Centre recognized, increasing exports from our province by 37%, and increasing the supports for small

businesses to be more productive. You heard of the celebrations of ALPA Equipment. Our businesses now have a government that is alongside them, helping to diversify—

Madam Speaker (Hon. Ms. Landry): Question period has expired.