

KEVIN O'REILLY—MLA FRAME LAKE
Instructional Hours
Committee of the Whole—2017-2018 Operating Budget Review
Dept. of Education, Culture and Employment—February 17, 2017

MR. O'REILLY: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I guess I want to follow up with the sorts of questions that my colleague from Yellowknife Centre had, because this is a communications problem again. It's not just a communications problem with the public. It's a communications problem with MLAs.

The MLU was signed off as part of the negotiation process. I get that. Some people have said that the reason it was done that way was to avoid having to pay teachers more, and to set an example for other negotiations that are going on. That's the kind of a deal. I don't -- whether that is true or not, you folks can laugh -- it was on the radio earlier this week. Maybe you don't listen to the radio anymore. In any event, people are talking about that in this way.

The MLU is signed. Then, there is a technical briefing for the media. The MLAs still haven't been told about this. Now, we've got a bill before us to actually change the instructional hours without a lot of evidenced-based decision-making that I can see that is going on here.

Yes, our instructional hours are higher than some other jurisdictions, but are we still going to have Alberta recognition? The Minister said in the House when he was asked, "I'll have to get back to you, and I'll have to check to see that." Two days later, the same Minister gets up and says that he had a meeting with the Minister of Education of Alberta, and that things seem to be okay. I didn't quite get it. The communications around this with the Regular MLAs have been confusing at best, and we've got a bill now before us without any evidence of whether this is going to be a good move or not.

Look, teachers, they work very hard, and hats off to these guys. They deserve everything they can get, but when they're at the negotiation table trying to get a deal that they can sell to their membership, that's the only kind of concession that they can get from this government, that is what they are going to go for. Hats off for them in getting that.

The way that this has been communicated to Regular MLAs, let alone the public, has been a disaster. What is the Minister going to do about this? We haven't even had a technical briefing around this yet. Thank you, Mr. Chair. Sorry, I'm getting worked up because the other side doesn't seem to think that there is a problem, as usual. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

CHAIRPERSON (Mr. McNeely): Thank you, Mr. O'Reilly. I must remind Members of being respectful for one another, and there is still time allowed, Mr. O'Reilly. If you want to ask a question pertaining to communication, you still have time.

MR. O'REILLY: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I did have a question at the end. I asked the Minister: when are we going to get a technical briefing on the instructional hours, and some actual evidence that this is a good move? Thank you, Mr. Chair.

CHAIRPERSON (Mr. McNeely): Thank you, Mr. O'Reilly. Minister Moses.

HON. ALFRED MOSES: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I want to thank the honourable Member for recognizing that our teachers are overworked, averaging 52 hours a week. Research has shown that when teachers have the opportunity to have prep time and prepare for their courses, that students get a quality education, they have enough time to provide quality education, and this was something that came out of a legally binding agreement, collective agreement, between the Teachers' Association and the Government of the Northwest Territories.

If the Member would like, the honourable Members would like, we can resend the package that we did send them. Our office is looking to set up a meeting with the Standing Committee on Social Development to look at giving that briefing to Members, but this was a collective agreement, and I just want to let the Members know that, and it's something that's going to enhance the quality of education and quality teaching that teachers provide. Plus, it also gives them the opportunity for professional development.

So there was research done behind it, and we're not just throwing things out there just because we think it's the right thing to do. We work with our teachers and the NWT Teachers' Association. Thank you, Mr. Chair. Just to be clear, this wasn't about money at all; this was something that was collectively agreed upon between the NWT Teachers' Association and the GNWT. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

CHAIRPERSON (Mr. McNeely): Thank you, Minister Moses. Mr. O'Reilly.

MR. O'REILLY: Thanks, Mr. Chair. So just in case anybody misunderstands, I fully support collective bargaining; it's the right thing to do, and as long as both sides can reach an agreement, that's fantastic. It would be helpful, though, if the Regular MLAs were once in a while actually informed about what's going on with collective bargaining, but that's perhaps a bigger issue.

So the Minister is going to offer a technical briefing; great. Can he tell us, though, the instructional hours for high school students, has this been discussed in detail with Alberta and will our high school students, under the reduced instructional hours, still be fully recognized as having an equivalent degree as students in Alberta? Thanks, Mr. Chair.

CHAIRPERSON (Mr. McNeely): Thank you, Mr. O'Reilly. Minister Moses.

HON. ALFRED MOSES: Thank you. We have had officials speaking with Alberta officials, but I also mentioned that Alberta has taken a different model as well and being flexible in the way they teach their hours, as I had answered questions in the House I think to the Member for Nahendeh when he was asking the questions earlier this week. As I mentioned, these plans aren't going to be divulged until the end of March for each school, and we can ensure that we give the supports to the principals and the teachers as they're developing these plans. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

CHAIRPERSON (Mr. McNeely): Thank you, Minister Moses. Mr. O'Reilly.

MR. O'REILLY: Thanks, Mr. Chair. So as I understand it, it's still under discussion, then, with the Government of Alberta; is that correct? Thank you, Mr. Chair.

CHAIRPERSON (Mr. McNeely): Thank you, Mr. O'Reilly. Minister Moses.

HON. ALFRED MOSES: I'll go to my deputy minister for that one. Thank you

CHAIRPERSON (Mr. McNeely): Thank you, Minister Moses. Deputy Minister Haener.

MS. HAENER: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Yes, we do follow the Alberta curriculum and we work in partnership with Alberta to ensure that we have good, strong programming in schools. As the Minister mentioned, Alberta as well is looking at its instructional hours and has been engaging in change there in terms of the number of instructional hours that they have in many of their schools, so we're not alone in that area.

Rest assured we are not doing anything that would jeopardize the validity of a high school diploma here in the North and the link to that Alberta curriculum. There's no risk there at all. We continue to have the departmental exams as well that we utilize, and that is linked to Alberta. Officials continue to discuss many facets of our curriculum and instructional time and those types of things with Alberta on an ongoing basis Thank you

CHAIRPERSON (Mr. McNeely): Thank you, Deputy Minister Haener. Mr. O'Reilly.

MR. O'REILLY: Thanks, Mr. Chair. I'll take the deputy minister at her word; I appreciate the response. They've got to find a way to get that kind of message out to MLAs; thankfully, you've done it today, but we've also got to get that out to the public. Thanks, Mr. Chair, that's all I've got.