

Committee of the Whole
Review of Bill 16, An Act to Amend the Education Act
Kevin O'Reilly Opening Remarks
May 31, 2017

MR. O'REILLY: Thank you, Mr. Chair. First off, I want to thank the Standing Committee on Social Development for their exceptional work on Bill 16. I had the privilege of sitting in on many of their meetings. I also want to thank all of the people who participated in that review.

My remarks, I am going to focus on a little bit on STIP, and then I will have some remarks about junior kindergarten towards the end, as well. On the surface, this bill looks like it is small changes, but it has proven to be very challenging to get clear responses and information from the Minister and his department. This uncertainty has often given the appearance of setting teachers' interests against those of parents and created tremendous confusion. I have probably received more e-mails and calls on this bill compared to any of other matter during my term as an MLA.

A few key points I want to make about STIP: a huge amount of collaboration work went into the Education Renewal initiative as the way to transform our educational system to better meet the changing needs of our students while recognizing the critical role of teachers and their wellness, but changes in instructional hours was not a recommendation coming out of the Education Renewal initiative. I fully recognize the key role played by teachers as we raised two children here, in Yellowknife, and very much value the commitment of teachers here and across the Northwest Territories. Changes in instructional hours came out of the collective bargaining process as a means to relieve the pressure felt by overworked teachers and to ensure that they are treated fairly compared to other jurisdictions in Canada.

While I believe in and support collective bargaining, Regular MLAs had no idea as to what mandate was provided to GNWT negotiators assigned to the Northwest Territories Teachers' Association contract. This negotiating mandate was clearly driven by Cabinet's fiscal strategy and their desire to set a pattern for future negotiations with the Union Of Northern Workers. The NWTTA president went on the public record saying that there was no offer in terms of salary increases, so something else had to be done to get an agreement that teachers would accept. Once again, Cabinet's fiscal strategy was the driving force behind those negotiations, a strategy that has been rejected numerous times by Regular MLAs.

So what are the lessons we can learn from this? Number one, Regular MLAs have to pay much closer attention to what Cabinet is negotiating. I am not asking to be at the negotiating table, but Cabinet needs to share its approach and seek input from the Regular MLAs. That has yet to happen. I have asked for a briefing on the UNW negotiations. The finance Minister made a commitment to do that during our winter review of the 2017-18 budget, but it still has not taken place.

Number two, as a government, we need to invest more, a lot more, into education to improve student outcomes and teacher wellness by hiring more teachers and other

measures. Children should be amongst our highest priorities and, yes, even higher than building roads to resources.

Three, ECE needs to get back to the Education Renewal initiative as the real path to educational changes. The train wrecks of junior kindergarten implementation and STIP resulted from very poor and often contradictory communications from ECE and a lack of leadership. Junior kindergarten and STIP have diverted an enormous amount capacity away from the changes that everyone had agreed to make in the Education Renewal initiative.

To be clear, I believe our teachers are overworked and should be treated fairly. One option is a reduction and instructional hours, but another solution could be to hire more teachers and classroom assistants and other changes. Unfortunately, the bill does not address other options and has not provided an opportunity to fully explore all these options.

I want to turn quickly to the junior kindergarten portion of the bill. Everyone would agree, in an ideal world, that junior kindergarten is inherently a good thing, but the implementation has been fraught with poor communications and shifting responses. Junior kindergarten implementation has consumed an inordinate amount of political time and capital. It is beyond me how a policy analysis could have gone forward without considering financial impacts on busing, inclusive schooling, Aboriginal programming and other costs, or the impact on childcare space providers. No matter what the Minister has said, it is clearly not fully funded when it comes to inclusive schooling, Aboriginal programming, and busing.

Yesterday, we received the formula that ECE uses for funding schools, and we now have that information, finally, but it is not where it should be. I will continue to push the Minister very hard on these matters until there are clear and unequivocal commitments to fully fund these aspects of junior kindergarten implementation. I recognize that some of the words I have said are pretty harsh, but, I am sorry, I am going to call it the way it is. Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.