

KEVIN O'REILLY - MLA FRAME LAKE
Committee of the Whole—2019-2020 Operating Budget Review
Department of Education, Culture and Employment – March 3, 2020

MR. O'REILLY: Thanks, Mr. Chair. I have a couple of areas I'd like to explore. One is early learning childcare. The funding shown on page 41 actually looks like it's declining over time. The backdrop to this is that the early development instrument results were released in 2018, and they actually showed an increase in the vulnerability of our youngest students, children up to age five, which is not a good place to be. I know the former Premier got some, maybe, headlines that he really didn't want to get for talking about that in the media. In every single study I've ever seen about investment in early childhood development, big payoffs, 7 to 1, 10 to 1. TD Bank, I know, did a study on this. What is happening here with declining funding in this area of the budget? The results are things are getting worse, and how are we going to fix this? That's my question for the Minister. Thanks, Mr. Chair.

CHAIRPERSON (Mr. Rocky Simpson): Thank you, Member. Minister.

HON. R.J. SIMPSON: Thank you. In the early years of the agreement, money could be carried over, and so it shows up in here as more money at certain times. Then we have the decrease in the early childhood development and learning agreement due to the fact that it's sunsetting. Those are the issues with that. I agree; investments in early childhood are the best bang for your buck you can get, probably across any department. Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON (Mr. Rocky Simpson): Thank you, Minister. Member for Frame Lake.

MR. O'REILLY: Thanks, Mr. Chair. Well, this should make for some very interesting discussions when it comes to the supplementary appropriation in May-June, where we're going to try to get the biggest bang for our bucks. It's wonderful that the Minister and I are on the same page on this, and I look forward to more money in the supp for this particular investment. I want to go, though, to the funding formula for schools. I think that the Minister, even today, has said that that's something that is going to be reviewed. I'm just wondering if he can give us a little bit more explanation of how and when that's going to take place. Thanks, Mr. Chair.

CHAIRPERSON (Mr. Rocky Simpson): Thank you, Member. Minister.

HON. R.J. SIMPSON: The evaluation of the funding formula will take place in the coming years. We just put this mandate out, and committee knows there has been a lot of back and forth. The policy shops and all the departments have been going full-tilt and haven't necessarily had a chance to lay out our plan for the next four years. That's what we're working on. We know what we want to do. How exactly we're going to do it, that's still being worked out, so I don't have the details of this funding formula, but it's going to take engagement, obviously. I have my own concerns with this. As a Member for four years, I heard a lot about this. As I travel around the territory, too, I visit a school; everywhere I go, I visit the schools. You talk to the people who have to administer this funding, and you see the gaps that the previous Member mentioned.

There are some things that appear obvious, and so we have a good idea of where we need to start. I could go on about what we could possibly do, but, to the Member's point, I don't have a framework that we are going to evaluate the framework by at this point, and I don't have a concrete timeline, although that work is going to begin as soon as we are done with this whole process and we have a concrete plan to move forward. Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON (Mr. Rocky Simpson): Thank you, Minister. Member for Frame Lake.

MR. O'REILLY: Thanks, Mr. Chair. I want to thank the Minister for his honesty in all of that and forthrightness. I do have some ideas, though, that I will pitch his way. There was a collaborative approach taken with the NWTAC for the municipal funding gap review. There was a working group. They looked at the issue. They looked at some alternatives. It included people from MACA, as well. One of the principles that they said was that no community should lose funding as a result of this. I think that is a good thing. I think that is something you might want to think about as a principle for looking at the rejigging of the school funding formula, that no school should maybe lose money, so it's really about building all of our schools together. I trust that the Minister is going to do this in a collaborative fashion.

I guess the two things that I have heard in the short time that I have been here that are really problematic: one, inclusive schooling, that it should be more of a needs-based approach in terms of not just based on total enrolment; you really have to look at the needs of the kids in any particular school, in any particular district, to understand what it is that they need to help with and build inclusive schooling. That is one thing I have heard, and then, secondly: where there is a drop in enrolment from one year to the next, that can cause kind of a dramatic change in funding for a school authority, and it's kind of hard to make those sudden adjustments in terms of staffing and so on. I am aware that there are a couple of jurisdictions, I think in Manitoba and Ontario, where, even if there is a drastic change in enrolment, it's a phased-in approach to changing the formula so that a school board's funding doesn't go precipitously like this. Are those the kinds of things, though, that the department is going to look at in reviewing the school funding formula? Thanks, Mr. Chair.

CHAIRPERSON (Mr. Rocky Simpson): Thank you, Member. Minister.

HON. R.J. SIMPSON: Thank you. I will say the department has done some preliminary work on this already, on the funding formula. We are going to have to work together, talk about collaborative fashions, the education leaders, the chairs of the authorities in all of the different communities. There has been a lot of interest from Indigenous governments on this, as well, not just the funding formula but the act and how the renewal or the modernization of the act will relate to Indigenous governments and their involvement. If they are going to have a greater involvement, direct involvement, then they are going to be interested in this funding, so we need to engage with everyone.

I have either made an offer or the committee has asked for a briefing on the funding formula, and I am happy to do that. I am not sure if I have signed the official letter yet, but I am always

happy to provide briefings. The Member mentioned a few different ideas, and I think I have probably discussed them in this House with everyone so far. There are a lot of good ideas out there. Do we need to fund schools based on enrolment, or do we need to fund schools based on the outcomes we want to see? It's an interesting concept. It might be too expensive of a concept for us, but it's something that we are looking into. I am not just going to close the door on anything just because it might be too expensive. We are going to look into everything we can. I mean, I could go on and on, but I appreciate all of the comments that we are getting from everyone and everyone I speak to because everyone is affected by the education system and they all want to have their say, and I am happy to hear it. Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON (Mr. Rocky Simpson): Thank you, Minister. Member for Frame Lake.

MR. O'REILLY: Thanks, Mr. Chair. Yes, I appreciate the Minister's comments, and I am sure he will be happy to do this, but can he make a commitment to come to standing committee to talk about this? I know he is going to brief us, brief committee, on the funding formula itself, but in terms of a process of reviewing and changing, is he willing to come to committee and seek committee's input into designing that process? Thanks, Mr. Chair.

CHAIRPERSON (Mr. Rocky Simpson): Thank you, Member. Minister.

HON. R.J. SIMPSON: Thank you, and of course maybe we can do it all at once because I haven't had a chance to get in front of committee once yet, so, next time I get an opportunity, I will make the most of it. Thank you.