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DEBATES and PROCEEDINGS

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Bill No. 70 *The Education Amendment Act*

Mr. Forbes: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to rise and enter into the debate on Bill No. 70, *The Education Amendment Act, 2012 (No. 2)*. Clearly education is taking a real profile these days, and clearly it should. Clearly it should because if we are to sustain the economy that we've seen in this province, then we must have the resources to do that. And of course a well-educated community can provide that, but there are challenges. And we've seen that.

And so as the minister has approved . . . or is moving these amendments to *The Education Act*, we have a lot to say about it and a lot of questions about it. And I know many of my colleagues have stood and talked about the questions that the minister has suggested that would be the things that we need to do.

And of course what we've really talked about is the lens of priority. Some of the things that they've been doing over on this side of the House of government has made us reflect on what are their priorities. What are their choices? And we've seen that, we've just seen that debate now where they are going to spend \$6 million towards software and standardized testing that nobody seems to know an awful lot about, but the government sure seems to get worked up about it. They sure seem to get fired up about it as if it's something they have to defend, and this will be the hill that they will fight their battle on.

And it doesn't make a lot of sense in today's classrooms where we're seeing all sorts of challenges. And the challenge that we've saw, and today we saw the joint task force report on improving education and employment outcomes for First Nations and Métis people. And of course there is a final section that talks about will this report gather dust? And we saw that in fact last week when we were debating assessment on standardized testing, I asked a question over there about how many of their members had read their own report about the panel on student achievement.

And you know, it's very interesting that the report was commissioned in 2008 by the

current Minister of Finance, then minister of Education. And then we had one minister sit on it, and now we see a minister cherry-picking pieces of that report. And now they've done another one. I haven't had the chance to do a complete read of it, but I do have to tell you that it looks, from the first skim of it, it looks very thoughtful and very hitting the mark on so many ways. And of course whether it's the idea of dealing with drivers' licences, and you know, the other one that goes hand in hand where the drivers' licences is simple ID [identification] so you can set up a bank account. Now I haven't read that to see what they're really talking about, but it is interesting. But those little things really do matter.

But then it also talks about the holistic approach to education, which is so, so critical. And today's classrooms are facing those challenges, they're facing challenges from classroom composition with students with unique and diverse needs that must be met, that must be met. And it ranges from students who come from families who are living in poverty and trying to make those basic needs of life, whether it's food and shelter and clothing, right to the complex needs and especially when we get up to those who are in the gifted classrooms.

And we have and we talked about this last week, talking about mental health of students and how can we make strong resilient students. And that is a huge issue and we need to make sure we tackle that problem. We've seen that, as I said last week, with the Day of Pink on Wednesday, but the Pink Revolution, the whole week in Saskatoon and Saskatchewan, how critical it is that we get this right.

So I do really want to urge the government to get a sense of priorities of what's facing the students of today. Clearly it in many ways manifests itself in how they can connect to the labour market, but we have to go deeper than that. And I think this report, from what I can tell, does go deeper than that. And I know the people on the task force were outstanding citizens who, I think, will have offered an awful lot.

But this is the question before us: the government's priorities when it comes to education and what it sees as priorities and what can make the biggest difference right off, right off the bat, but also talking about systemic change that will make sure that everyone participates in our society, that no one is left out, that it's an inclusive society both in terms of quality of life, both in terms of their work and in their contributions, the resilience of their family, their own mental health, and their ability to withstand challenges, as we've said, from bullying.

So I want to take a minute to review what the minister has brought forward in terms of reasons for the changes that they have. And the first one is changing the compulsory school age that is presently seven years of age to six years of age. And he talks about how it hasn't been changed since the 1940s, not consistent with other jurisdictions in Canada. I'm not sure if that's, you know, the best reason. You know, I often think of this government having sort of a bit of a Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde complex. They like to be leaders but they also like to be followers. Sometimes they like to be alone; sometimes they want to be in the group.

And so whenever they feel it necessary, they throw out, well we want to be with everybody else. And then when sometimes, for example, Bill 85 where they create an employment code, no one else in Canada has it except for the federal government. So there they want to strike out on their own, and they feel that's a reasonable thing to do. So it's a bit of a conflicted, confusing message when they send out that they're doing this because we see other people doing this. And we know that's not necessarily the case.

And so we will take a look at that, and we'll ask a lot of questions. And we do know most students are six years, but there must have been a reason why seven. And I think it was probably to give parents an opportunity, in terms of parenting and different challenges or opportunities that families would have, but they had the opportunity to hold back their children till seven.

And I know, and there has been literature about kids who go to school later, a few years later, that in fact they flourish and they do really well. So I'm not quite as necessarily convinced, but we'll see what the research and what they have to say about that. And we think it's an important discussion to have.

The other one is a change of definition of school to reflect the kind of pre-kindergarten programs that are provided at school sites. So we'll take a look and talk about the different kind of approaches, that this government will be doing that, and how will they resource that change. It's very important that when we say we're going to move into the pre-kindergarten world and we're going to have programming that goes along with it, is that programming available across the province? Is it consistently offered? And I think this is an important opportunity to make sure we ensure that it is, that if it's going to go beyond the pilot stage then we have to make sure that it's consistent across the province. And that's very important.

Now one that I know, this is one that's been in the forefront of a lot of peoples' minds, is the change to the school day definition, and how the minister caused a bit of an uproar in the beginning of this year, talking about instructional minutes and instructional time and non-instructional time. And of course, you know, I think we actually did see this coming a couple of years ago when we saw the massive changes to The Education Act at that time. And while schools have worked through this, there are consequences to this. And you know, whether it's pension time and the number of days and what qualifies as a day, and so we want to make sure that there are no unintended consequences to this.

And you know, we did talk a little about this in terms of the mixed messages from the government. Yet again that were willing to step in at the provincial level and talk about instructional time. They wanted to get involved with standardized testing, but in no way did they want to get involved with the class size debate. And of course that's a big debate as well. And it's not only class size, but it's class composition, and meeting the unique needs of all children in classrooms. So it's not just as simple as saying, not as simple as saying that it's only about the number of minutes. It's much more complex than that.

And I think as this government takes on more and more of the responsibility for these decisions, it's going to leave the local autonomy of school boards in the way that they can

make these choices and work with what's best for their kids. Really one that we have to question what's the intention, and is it in the best interests of the child, best interests of the family, and in fact in the best interests of our province? Because we want to make sure all students flourish in this province, and when we start to get involved at the kind of levels, micromanaging that this government seems intent on or cherry-pick the things that they want to be involved in but not take on the challenging issues, and whether it's poverty at the family level or class composition, it's really important. It's really important. It leaves a lot of people with a lot of question marks. And so we have a lot of questions around that.

I'll go on and talk about the other changes he wants to talk. He talked about the consultation that, you know, and it is interesting how, I talked about the panel report that this government had commissioned in 2008. And when we had our debate just last week, many of the members over there looked as if they'd never heard of this panel report. And that's unfortunate because it's not that old. But when you do consult and you do come up with these major reports like the panel report, that you would think the government would have acted on it or discussed it or somehow signalled to the stakeholders.

So what's happening to that report, that consultation that we did for two years? They worked on it for two years — all the stakeholders — and it was put on a shelf. We sure hope that isn't what happens with this, but we've seen it too often. This government is falling into that trap of not honouring consultation, but in fact causing problems by ignoring their consultations. So this is really important.

It does talk about penalties. And some of those, we need to definitely ask more about this. It does talk about the stakeholders and how they do agree with that, and also talking about making it easier for newcomers to enrol in schools by clarifying what is a provincial resident. That's really important. We'll talk more about that, very important. Also people who come here on temporary permits. We see the situation at the University of Regina where we have students here, but this really speaks to more of the temporary work permits — people who come here, foreign temporary workers who come with children, and how do we make sure that they get the education that we've all come to expect in this province? So that's very important, Mr. Speaker.

And it also talks about the issues about families who live along borders of school divisions and the situation when it arises that one school may be undergoing major changes where it's losing a high school, losing a school, or even as simple as changing bus routes. How does that all happen? So that's very important. There are some other changes here. And I think that, as I said, when we move into committee, that there'll be many more questions.

But, Mr. Speaker, I know that, as I said, education clearly is emerging as one of the top issues this year and this session, clearly because our population is growing, clearly because there's more children in our schools. There's the overcrowding, but there's the class composition, as I say, English as a second language, but also making sure that we do all we can to support First Nations and Aboriginal students so those students can reach their full potential and all that that means in our society here in Saskatchewan in terms of

connecting with the labour market and whatever situation that may mean, whether it's arts, culture, mining, in the oil sector, whatever. But we have to make sure that that happens.

But we also have to make sure that we meet the needs of young people who are feeling challenges around mental health and school and whether that's through being bullied, lack of confidence, that type of thing. These are the realities of our new classrooms. And this is something that we've worked hard on for many years, and we will continue to meet that challenge, but we need to provide the resources for that. And we've often raised that question, particularly in this . . . [inaudible] . . . in this budget.

So, Mr. Speaker, with that I know I don't have many more things to say with this because I am looking forward to having questions about this Act, Bill 70.

But again I just want to say that it's about making choices and setting priorities. And we definitely have that with this government who seems to be ideologically driven around particularly standardized testing at a provincial level and all that that means but are not meeting the needs of students in our schools, particularly around classroom composition and students of First Nations and Aboriginal descent. We need to support these students as much as we possibly can to make sure that they can do this. So I'm not sure this bill goes a long way to do that. But not every . . . We understand there are other needs too.

So with that, Mr. Speaker, I will conclude my remarks. Thank you.