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STANDING COMMITTEE ON HUMAN SERVICES

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Heritage Language Schools

Mr. Forbes: — I'll start for a bit here. Thank you very much, and I appreciate those answers. Now do you have someone or a unit in the ministry that are your go-to people for a second or bilingual or heritage languages?

Hon. Mr. Morgan: — I don't think we have a specific division.

Ms. Johnson: — In our student achievement and supports branch, we do have consultants who are supporting all of the French language material in the schools. So French immersion and the francophone school divisions are supported by staff in the ministry. I am not sure if we have others supporting the other languages though, but Brett could answer that one.

Mr. Waytuck: — Hi. Brett Waytuck from student achievement and supports. So yes, we do have curriculum consultants within student achievement and supports that support French language but we also, in the instruction unit, have people who support English as an additional language and have managed the relationship with people who are learning additional languages.

Mr. Forbes: — So they're experts in English as a second language. Is that what you're saying?

Hon. Mr. Morgan: — As an additional language.

Mr. Forbes: — As an additional language?

Hon. Mr. Morgan: — Yes. The same program was originally called ESL or English as a second language, but now they're often multilingual when a new person arrives, so it's EAL [English as an additional language] rather than ESL.

Mr. Forbes: — But you don't have any group that really works in the area of teaching heritage languages?

Mr. Waytuck: — No, we do not.

Mr. Forbes: — [Inaudible] . . . so who do you depend on for that expertise?

Mr. Waytuck: — Teachers within the school divisions are the ones who would be considered the experts and doing that work.

Mr. Forbes: — Okay. And where did you . . . Do you know where people found those teachers?

Mr. Waytuck: — I'm sorry. I wouldn't have . . . I don't have that information with me, but we could certainly find out from school divisions where they may have recruited people.

Mr. Forbes: — Yes.

Hon. Mr. Morgan: — Our expectation is that they would be recruited by the school division in the ordinary course, you know, that all of the staff is employed by the division. Heritage languages would likely have had volunteers that they recruited from whatever other sources they have.

Mr. Forbes: — Well I'm thinking that, you know . . . What I'm gathering — but I could be wrong — is the fact that the education system is benefiting an awful lot from recent immigrants from whatever country you name, whether it's Russia or Germany or Pakistan, whatever. They come over. They may be qualified teachers but they're willing to teach, and there's an expectation that they become accredited. They may teach only that language. They may not teach math or, you know, the classic story where you have to teach the science as well, but they teach the language that's being asked for in that school division. Is that . . . [inaudible] . . . do you think? Or do you think these are kids who are born in Saskatchewan who are learning . . .

Hon. Mr. Morgan: — You're asking the nature of the people that would take the SOHL or would be taking the credit classes?

Mr. Forbes: — Well who's teaching these classes, these heritage language programs? Because I get the sense from you, Minister, that they're professional teachers. They've gone through the teachers college here at the U of R [University of Regina] or U of S [University of Saskatchewan].

Hon. Mr. Morgan: — Not necessarily. They're volunteers. They may or may not be being paid. It would depend on the specific program that's there. We don't establish the program.

Mr. Forbes: — No, no, but I'm talking about the ones who are teaching in our systems.

Hon. Mr. Morgan: — They're the full-time. Then they would be an accredited teacher. And so if your question, what is the background of those teachers or where do they learn the other language, we would probably have to go back to the individual divisions to do it because the hiring is done by the divisions and if they're accredited through the teachers regulatory board, we probably wouldn't look beyond that. It's not something we've ever studied or done background work.

Mr. Forbes: — It seems to me a dangerous gap, where we have such, you know, in Saskatchewan we're benefiting from such an inflow of immigrants from around the world and we have this established heritage language program of some 40 different languages in 17 different schools and we're shutting that . . . Really, you know, this is a powerful message from the Government of Saskatchewan, for \$225,000, to say we don't want that; we're seeing it as volunteer.

And I'm hearing a serious gap of lack of knowledge from the Ministry of Education, maybe because it was only \$225,000 and it's maybe kind of goofy to have two or three people in a unit to manage that, but at the same time to make that kind of a decision and what the ramifications are of that out in the public.

Because it's not only the kids from those cultures that are learning it but it's people who wish to do . . . And we know this for a fact, especially with Japanese or Mandarin, that is a program that people, a language people often learn for economic reasons, for trade. I'm concerned about that, that there might have been some gaps in this knowledge, but I do understand that — and I'll come to my question here — that just a few years ago the Ministry of Education did ask for a rigorous evaluation of the heritage language schools program because of the funding. Is that the case?

Mr. Waytuck: — We provided additional funding to them to help support an assessment program that they could use within those schools. Again it wasn't credit based because most of them are not teaching credit-based courses. It was to support the volunteers in the work that they were doing in the classroom.

Hon. Mr. Morgan: — I'm not sure whether your question said that you felt there was a gap in the knowledge the ministry had or whether there was a gap in education in the province because the program was no longer offered.

Mr. Forbes: — I'm saying it appears there's a gap right now. I'm saying that this gap, this decision has been made in perhaps a bit of a knee-jerk, very quick manner.

Hon. Mr. Morgan: — So your question is the gap is no longer having the SOHL programming.

Mr. Forbes: — Well to determine whether it's a good program or not. I mean, I'm hearing . . .

Hon. Mr. Morgan: — I'm sorry. Then you're saying the gap is in the knowledge and the questions that the ministry are asking? I'm asking which one it is.

Mr. Forbes: — Well or haven't asked because there . . . You know, I don't see that there's an expertise within the ministry or people who could evaluate whether or not this \$225,000 cut is a good idea or a bad idea.

Hon. Mr. Morgan: — I think the information we've provided is that the for-credit classes are the vast majority of the ones that are offered. They're offered in most of the schools. We gave you a list of which were 10, 20, and 30 level classes in a variety of different languages. We feel that our role as government should be to ensure that different language education is available. So the information we provided to you shows that it is.

SOHL was providing — and I don't mean to criticize the program in any way — was an after-school or an evening program and it was a cultural or . . . You know, there was certainly a learning component to it, but it was not core to the services that were provided by way of 10, 20, 30 classes that we provide, and maybe the people that were taking it weren't looking for a degree or diploma. But what we have done through our schools is we have a fairly significant group of classes that are available in a variety of different languages which we feel are important to offer, and are continuing to offer. So we made the decision that this was not core to our educational function.

Now I don't mean to demean or say the people that do it should not continue with it but it is not core to the function that we offer. It's not a fill-in for the things that are core because the things that are core are offered and will continue to be offered.

Mr. Forbes: — So, but this is the question is, so were you advised of that by your staff? Or is that something you came to your own thinking? Because it appears to me that the issue is the ministry doesn't really have . . . and I'm not hearing them make the case to you. But you've had several reasons why you really don't want this program, and I think that's unfortunate. You've said it's because it's after school but now we know it's several classes that are credit are offered after school.

Hon. Mr. Morgan: — Less than 2 per cent of them are credit classes. So it's fine if there's overlap. We're not worried about it. The decision was made that it was not core to our main function of providing education to the students of the province. And we looked at and will continue to look at virtually every program that we offer and say, is this core to what we do? Is this something that duplicates something that's already there, as this one does? Is this something that's absolutely essential?

We had mentioned earlier that the resource decline in the province was very substantial, well in excess of \$1 billion. So it's not a matter of going through and saying, well if you just did this program, or you just did that program. What we're looking for is savings in a variety of different places all the way across government,

whether it would be Education, Health, Social Services, and ones especially that don't impact on people if the program is discontinued. And this one would certainly fall into that because if a student wishes to take the class, the class would be available to them as a regular credit class and the cost, if they wish to continue, \$4.58 a month.

Mr. Forbes: — Well you've brought that up, that \$4.58, but surely you must be aware that this is already costing parents, and there's a whole range of costs to it. This has not been free because of the Ministry of Education. This has been a supplement to the 17 different schools, some of which will have to close down, and then you're really starting a spiral here.

[19:15]

And you know, I mean it's interesting. Maybe we have two different definitions of core, but when I think of core, I think of core curriculum, what's really important to the learning of our students and our children. Now maybe you have a different definition, but to me it's lifelong learning. And we all know . . . And I think now it would be interesting if the minister is being advised that it's not a good idea to learn a second language; people who learn second languages actually have more difficulty in school. In fact it's the opposite. We know that actually, that people with second languages do better in school. And so this is the concern I have, is it seems like we're on a downward spiral.

Hon. Mr. Morgan: — I certainly agree that learning a second language is a desirable thing to do. It's good for everyone's education. It's good for their role as a citizen, and I wish I had done better at learning second languages when I was young. But we offer them through the regular 10, 20, 30 program that we've got. This was an outside-of-school-hour program and duplicated the things that were already being offered within the system. And you made the point — and I agree with it — that a large portion of the cost was already borne by the parents or by the community. And we're saying to them, thank you for what you're doing. If you wish to continue it, we're no longer providing the \$4.58 supplement.

Now I can tell you that, you know, this amount of money allowed us to retain the equivalent of two classroom teachers in the province. So it came down to, you know, if you're looking at an either/or — and we probably shouldn't, but if you are — the cost of the saving allowed for two full-time classroom teachers in the system somewhere in the province that would be teaching regular 10, 20, 30, or whatever the things are that they would be teaching.

Mr. Forbes: — You know, Mr. Minister, you've given me quite a few kind of . . . And I don't know if the ministry is working overtime on creating these sort of interesting metaphors. First it was \$55 a month. Then they figured out . . . they divided by 31 and they came up with \$4.18, and now we're having two salaries of teachers. I mean this is demeaning to the people who worked really hard in the Saskatchewan

Organization of Heritage Languages to put it up to, it's either two teachers or it's 4,000 kids. Is that what we're talking here: 4,000 kids or two teachers?

Hon. Mr. Morgan: — No, no. What I'm saying is, that's the cost, is the equivalent of two teachers. And I'm not saying it's a matter of saying, oh we needed the two teachers; therefore we couldn't . . . I'm trying to put it in the context of what the cost of a program was that duplicates something that's already taking place. We didn't do the calculation, you know, that said \$30 or whatever the other one was — I think that was done by somebody in the opposition — because we knew when we made the decision that it was under \$5 a month, was what the actual cost would be to the parents or the people that are sponsoring the kids to go.

And I'm not saying this is a bad program or that it's an undesirable program or anything like that at all. And I hope that the program continues, would love to see it continue. However our focus is and will be core programming for our students, which is the programming that will offer them a graduation certificate so that they're able to go on to post-secondary either through regional college, polytechnic, or one of the universities. These programs didn't. So that's why we look at things that are core to what we do as what our function is.

Mr. Forbes: — Has anybody in that youth language unit told you what the best age to learn a second language or to retain their language is? Is it grade 9 or 10?

Hon. Mr. Morgan: — No, it's earlier than that. You know, kids learn language when they're very young. They learn language before . . .

Mr. Forbes: — That's what the whole thing about heritage language schools . . .

Hon. Mr. Morgan: — So you know, these are high school level. I'm not saying that this doesn't offer a useful benefit to those people that take it. I encourage them to take it. It's not core to what we're doing. We have language studies that are in there. We look to the parents and we look to the community people, you know.

Mr. Forbes: — Now the other thing is, did anybody or any of your staff . . . You're cutting the active child benefit, which is a \$150 tax credit for people who do cultural activities. So as well as increasing the fees of people now having to pay for the languages, did you have a sense of . . . And that's impacting some 3,000 to 3,500 kids, and there may be crossover. I don't know what percentage it is in terms of the heritage languages.

But here you have actually these kids are getting a double whammy here, these families are. You're cutting, you know . . . On one hand, for the government who has an operating budget of \$176 million of what that comes out of, and then now forcing parents to pay more. When they come to next year to get their active child tax credit they go, oh yet again a second cut. So I don't know if you thought of the impacts, the unintended consequences here.

Hon. Mr. Morgan: — You know, we looked at a variety of different things. This was not an easy budget process to go through. We looked at what happened in different provinces, and we looked at the size of the deficit that our neighbouring province had. We looked at the nature of reductions that were done in some of the eastern provinces to try and maintain a balance.

So here we struck a compromise. So we have a deficit in the province close to half a billion dollars. We have a decline in revenue in the range of a billion and a half. So if we want to balance at that level, that means we need to find some savings. So we looked at a myriad of different programs that were being offered and said, okay is this one that we need? Is this something we can live without? Is this something that will not impact families? Is this something that we have an alternative that's available? In this one there is an alternative that's available.

So those are the type of things that we looked at. And that's done in health, social services, and across the board. So none of these were easy decisions. The programs that were reviewed, none of them were bad programs or very, very few. Programs were provided by good folks meaning well, but not core to what we do as a government and the things that we need to look at if we want to maintain the balance in our budget. I mean, some of the things we had before don't exist. And this one, when you look at it as being a duplication of things that already exist, relatively low cost to the individuals that are affected by it, that was why the decision was made.

Mr. Forbes: — What's interesting about this was a program that was started in 1991 — and of course, if we remember what the economics of the province was back in '91 and the tough choices the government had to make — but yet they started this. And in many ways it was visionary because here we have a province that's rich in its culture and attracting people from all over the world.

And I think what it would have been in '91 if this program had not started or it had not been funded by, in part by the government of Saskatchewan, where we would be today. Would we be attracting the immigrants that we are today with the message that this is a warm and welcoming province and you're welcome here. We support you and embrace you. But we're . . . For \$225,000 — because I do get the sense of the situation we're in — but clearly this is, as I say, of \$176 million, the investment here is long-term and it could be short-sighted. So I'm going to stop my comments.

Hon. Mr. Morgan: — We looked at it. It was a difficult decision amongst a lot of other difficult decisions. We also, during the election, we looked at the costing platform that was put forward by the opposition, and it called for I think a 1.1 per cent increase in funding for education. So I think it was something like, when you looked at it, it was \$27 million. So I'm thinking where would the capital come from? Where would the other things come from that are in there? What would they do with that \$27 million?

The platform that was put forward, I sort of thought you're going to end up cutting not just this program, because this one was announced before the election, but you have a lot more things that you would be cutting if that was the type of increase. Now I don't know whether that 1.1 per cent you were talking about was an increase over the existing funding for the previous year or whether that was on top of inflation or whatever, but the increase that we've come forward with is, you know, in the range of 8 per cent plus a large amount of capital is there.

So you know, when we went into it, you can't have it both ways. You can't say during the election we were going, we were only going to do this much, vote for us on that. And now everyone's saying, oh no, we really meant way more. I mean, you know . . .

Mr. Forbes: — Mr. Minister, I'm going to stop before you go to the Leap document.

Hon. Mr. Morgan: — I was working up to that.

Mr. Forbes: — I'm going to say we did lose that election. And you are the government, and you are responsible. The people of Saskatchewan are looking for you for leadership. But we will continue this conversation, and you are aware of the stack of petitions I have on my desk, so there is a groundswell of people who are very concerned about this.

So thank you very much. I appreciate the difficult position you are in. I know the folks at the heritage languages do as well. But they are going to be advocating for this because they believe passionately in this. And they've caught me up with that bug as well because I think this is a good, good thing. So thank you very much, and I'll turn that over to my colleagues. Thank you