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General Revenue Fund – Education – Vote 5

Mr. Forbes: Well the reason I'm asking, because it is serious, you know, because we take this part very seriously, and that when we see, days after estimates are done, governments make new announcements outside of budget . . . And one of the ones that we're looking at is disabilities. I appreciate your comments but I guess I just want to register that observation that I think it's poor governance when we get through this and we see this . . . Because my concern is around the disability strategy that has been delayed outside the budget cycle. So we'll hear the report. Now I know it's not your area. But education is one of the streams of that, and it's a very, very important part, and there's people who are talking about educational issues.

So we were disappointed to hear that this final report will come out sometime I think towards the end of May, after session is done, and there can't be any public scrutiny of the report for a year, which is unfortunate.

But I do want to draw your attention to . . . These are the comments that were in the strategy. It was an interim report and it talks about what was happening in education and those who are deaf. And I'll read this:

People who are Deaf [and this is from page 17, *Our Experience, Our Voice*, people who are Deaf] attempted to describe their silent world, which for many is incredibly isolating, and they told us Saskatchewan's system is failing them. Living in a world of silence makes it so much harder to learn any language, let alone communicate in a way that can be understood. Being unable to sign to your teacher, bus driver, caregiver, or classmates because they cannot understand or communicate back leaves Deaf people very isolated. Much of the discussion centred on issues such as development of language, availability and quality of interpreters, and recognition of American Sign Language (ASL) as an official

language of instruction.

So I'm curious. You probably have folks in the department who have read this and they're aware of this and preparing or probably have already prepared a response to this. What is the response to the ministry to this position?

Mr. Miller: Thank you. So certainly the ministry has committed to working with the community for the provision of services to its youth. The government recognizes school divisions are in the best place, on a day-to-day basis, to provide services to children in collaboration with parents and guardians and to identify the programming and support that's needed to meet the needs of all children, including deaf and hard of hearing children.

The services provided to individuals who are deaf and hard of hearing are basically in place to work towards supporting their independence and success, their personal well-being, and a capacity to function in and contribute to the broader community. So the delivery of services through school divisions is the model, and government of course supports the provision of services through its overall funding allocations.

Mr. Forbes: So how does the minister and the officials feel about the services provided to the deaf community?

Hon. Mr. Morgan: I met with a number of the groups earlier in the year, and there appears to be somewhat of a divide among the different, amongst the groups you talk to. Some of the people feel that there should be a return to a congregated setting for the education of hard of hearing children.

As you're aware, the facility in Saskatoon has long since closed, and we've now moved with most people with challenges that we have an integrated approach where we will try and bring the services to where the students are. It's certainly a more expensive process to try and have the integrated model, but it appears to be better for the students because they participate with other children, and it's healthy for the other children to have the interaction with them. So that appears to be the direction that's been taken.

Having said that, we look to the divisions to provide the support and to make the decisions for the students that are there, and we understand that there are different opinions as to how the services should be provided.

Mr. Forbes: So I know you've done some good work around Braille and helping the blind. In this case when you talk about your commitment, what does that mean?

Mr. Miller: Sorry. In terms of . . .

Mr. Forbes: Well I'm curious. You said your position was one of commitment, and I'm asking, what does that mean?

Hon. Mr. Morgan: In simple terms, we provide the resources to the divisions, and whether it's a speech-language pathologist or an audiologist or whatever, the divisions

access those services. We provide block funding, you know, the funding, as you're aware, through the funding model, and we look to the divisions to provide those services and to come to us if there's something that is either lacking or they need to share services with another division. The feedback we have from them is that they are meeting the demand through the model that they are currently using.

Mr. Forbes: So you don't feel any pressure to listen to the concerns that are raised?

Hon. Mr. Morgan: As I indicated, I met with groups, and we're always willing to listen. When the report comes out, it may indicate that we need to do things differently or have somewhat of a change or a refinement in direction, and we're always willing to do that. The point I was making was there's two methodologies for dealing with hard of hearing children. Most of the divisions have chosen not to use a congregated model to try to provide services to the student within the classroom, and we understand that's what's taking place.

Mr. Forbes: So I'll read the rest of this, and I quote, "We heard that children who are deaf . . ." And when we say "we" are referring to the people writing the report had heard:

. . . that children who are deaf are not learning how to communicate. The Deaf community told us Saskatchewan is far behind other provinces with respect to Deaf education. There is no longer a school for the Deaf in Saskatchewan, so some parents are sending their Deaf children out of province or even to the United States to attend a school for the Deaf. Most parents cannot afford this expense, and are frustrated with the fact that they have to send their children elsewhere to get an adequate education. They spoke of "lost generations" since the Saskatchewan School for the Deaf closed. They fear without recognition of their language and culture, young people who are deaf will grow up without developing any communication skills and continue to be isolated and unable to be included in their communities.

And you know, I just want to say that, as a teacher myself, I found this very interesting when I met with these folks who many articulated these concerns by the Saskatchewan deaf and hard of hearing. And so it's not just a random group, but a pretty significant advocacy group.

And we were able to be at a conference in the fall that talked about the importance of ASL as opposed to Signed English, which is like an interesting way to . . . You know, you're signing the letters. You're not communicating words or emotions. You're signing. If it's hello, it's h-e-l-l-o. You're not saying, hi, or, you know, any of the forms of that. And I know as well some other members attended that conference as well.

I think there is room for some sort of accommodation here. They're not asking to go back. They're not asking for the opening of the school on Clarence Avenue. That's silly and beyond. I mean they're not talking about that, congregating all the deaf children in one building. But some schools in Saskatchewan I think I read, I know of at least one where they are congregated and they are using ASL as opposed to Signed English. And it

seems to be a pretty innovative thing.

And in just my simple research . . . Now maybe there's folks here that have done more research on it, but I looked across Canada and I see that we are truly not with the rest of the folks on this. Now maybe we think further ahead, that we're further ahead, but when I talk to these folks, they say actually we're not. And I can appreciate that there are success stories and it's a wonderful thing with cochlear implants. Nobody's saying you have to get rid of technology either. But there should be a choice and there should be . . . You know, I think we could accommodate that.

Now what they have really raised issues about this, and this is what I'm thinking about when I'm asking you, when you talk about your funding, that we are in fact really way behind other provinces when it comes to funding for people who can sign, that in fact if you want an interpreter, it's very difficult to get an interpreter as opposed to Alberta or Manitoba. And again it's the pay that people get. So they feel if you've developed that skill, you should be in another province. This is not the province to be in education if you have that skill.

So this is why I'm wondering about the commitment. I mean when people look to the province for leadership in this, that they can step back and say, so what's happening in other parts of Canada and is this a realistic thing?

Hon. Mr. Morgan: I think you make some fair comments. When I met with the ASL group, there would certainly be some people that would like to see the reopening of some kind of a congregated facility. I just want to put it out there right now there is no intention to reopen the R.J.D. Williams School, which is by the way on Cumberland, not on Clarence. But in any event we're not going back to a residential type of school.

I think it's probably worthwhile, and we'd asked the officials some time ago to see, when the disability report comes out, whether best practices would indicate whether we should have two models in place at the same time, or to review what is the recommended or what would be the best practices model going forward.

So that was some time ago we've had those discussions. And I know that the officials will look at the disability report when it's released and may be able to have further discussion at that point in time. But that's not the model that's currently being undertaken. So in fairness to your comment, do we commit money to ASL? Not at the present time, but it's something that maybe should be looked at, at some point in the future. We appreciate there's a desire for some families to have that.

Mr. Forbes: Well I appreciate hearing that because I think, you know, that we can always learn from the past, and sometimes then as a teacher I think about inclusion . . . It'd be interesting to hear the new deputy minister speak on this because of her experience. But sometimes inclusion doesn't work as well as it's intended.

Hon. Mr. Morgan: If she wishes to speak, if she wishes to speak now, I'll certainly let her.

Mr. Forbes: But the point is I do think it's an important area that we take some fresh eyes to, and we look across Canada. Maybe I'm wrong about what the best practices are, but I feel that it's one that I think I've learned a lot, learning, talking to these folks about. And in fact, that if there can be a choice . . . And a congregated setting can be a small setting. It doesn't have to be a full school. A classroom can be made to work in that way, just as long it's a bit of a community.

Hon. Mr. Morgan: The argument that's advanced by ASL is that it's not learning to deal with a disability. It's learning another, it's learning a different language because it's a different method of communication, and should be sort of accommodated as such. And I appreciate the point that they've made, and it's something that we'll certainly undertake to look at. Having said that, I don't make a commitment that it will be a direction of the province, but it's certainly something that there's been requests have come forward. And we've met; we've heard from those people.

Ms. MacRae: I would just like to add that I do have some understanding of the complexity of the issues that you raise, and the differing viewpoints in the community. I also know, having worked in three other provinces, that it isn't a very easy recruiting process for folks who have that sign language. The grass may look greener on the other side of the fence, but it's a bit of a challenge sometimes to find the skilled interventionists or translators that you need.

Mr. Forbes: Well thank you. And I appreciate the comment about how the folks who are deaf often don't necessarily see it as a disability. And I think that's an interesting perspective that we could learn from.