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Standardized Testing and Student Achievement

Mr. Forbes: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, people have been asking where the priorities are for this Saskatchewan Party government when it comes to education. Concerned parents, teachers, and educators have started a petition now against the Sask Party's plan to spend over \$5.9 million this year on standardized testing instead of the real pressures facing our classrooms and our students. The petition has gathered steam quickly, Mr. Speaker, and now there are well over 1,300 signatures already.

Professor Paul Orlowski of the University of Saskatchewan's faculty of Education says the plan for the province would bring about the longest period of standardized testing of any place in Canada. The minister has yet to articulate why his government is moving ahead with this extreme version of standardized testing. Mr. Speaker, why is the Sask Party government spending at least \$5.9 million on standardized testing?

The Speaker: I recognize the Minister of Education.

Hon. Mr. Marchuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and I thank the member opposite for the question. You know, we announced this student achievement initiative last spring. And when we made the announcement, Mr. Speaker, we didn't announce a testing program, Mr. Speaker; we announced a student achievement initiative. This is a comprehensive, balanced approach to assessing where our students are in terms of their knowledge of the curriculum, their place in the classrooms, and their social well-being, Mr. Speaker. This is not the American, high-stakes model. This is not about ranking schools. This is not about ranking teachers. And it's certainly not tied to funding, Mr. Speaker. This is a program that's geared at student success.

The Speaker: I recognize the member for Saskatoon Centre.

Mr. Forbes: Well, Mr. Speaker, it seems to have funding implications: \$5.9 million worth that could be used for other pressures in our classrooms. So, Mr. Speaker, parents and teachers do not know why the minister wants to divert precious educational resources

away from teaching and into testing. They don't know what the minister means when he says it's going to be a made-in-Saskatchewan approach. And what educators know is that standardized testing is one-size-fits-all, and that doesn't help individual learning needs of our students.

Mr. Speaker, this province faces a low graduation rate for all students for all backgrounds, but especially low graduation rates for First Nations and Métis students. Surely the Sask Party government needs a better response to this situation than telling the teachers they must do more testing instead of teaching. Mr. Speaker, how could the Sask Party government get their priorities so mixed up when it comes to education?

The Speaker: I recognize the Minister of Education.

Hon. Mr. Marchuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and again thanks to the member opposite for the question. You know, when our government announced its budget, we announced a balanced budget. We didn't announce an either-or budget, Mr. Speaker. And that's why, and that's why for the first time in history, \$17 million for current year enrolment, Mr. Speaker; that's supports for the classroom, \$268 million for supports for learning; that's supports for the classroom, Mr. Speaker. \$5.9 million to drive a student achievement initiative which is all-encompassing, Mr. Speaker, not just the testing program. More First Nations and Métis initiatives, Mr. Speaker — \$3.8 million for the First Nations and Métis Achievement Fund and an additional \$3 million to help start the action for the recommendations that will come out of the joint task force, Mr. Speaker, and I could go on. 50 new pre-kindergarten programs that directly affect early learning. 500 more child care spaces, Mr. Speaker; that's supports for learning.

The Speaker: I recognize the member for Saskatoon Centre.

Mr. Forbes: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. You know, Mr. Speaker, other jurisdictions are walking away from standardized testing. In fact, in Texas the architect of George W. Bush's education plan said, "I've looked at the evidence and I've concluded they're wrong." She went on to say, "Instead of raising standards, this actually lowered standards."

And, Mr. Speaker, here in Canada, Alberta is making the standardized testing they implemented a thing of the past. Their Minister of Education asked his ministry to look at other ways to gather data on student achievement instead of using these tests. They're looking to improve everyday assessment teachers already do. So, Mr. Speaker, my question: with other jurisdictions recognizing standardized testing isn't the right fit for 21st century education, why would the Sask Party government take us down the wrong path?

The Speaker: I recognize the Minister of Education.

Hon. Mr. Marchuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The member opposite is flat-out wrong. The province of Alberta is not moving away from their provincial achievement tests. In fact, if I may quote the Minister of Education, Mr. Johnson, "We don't want to abandon

standardized testing; we just want to modernize it,” Mr. Speaker, which is exactly what the province of Saskatchewan has embarked upon, Mr. Speaker.

We are embarking on modernizing our student achievement initiatives. We’ve had assessment for learning in this province for the last 20 years, Mr. Speaker. We intend to modernize it. We came up with a new program to deal with it, Mr. Speaker, and it’s called the student achievement initiative for the province of Saskatchewan. Thank you.

The Speaker: I recognize the member for Saskatoon Centre.

Mr. Forbes: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Well this is the minister that says the evidence is evident. So perhaps he should listen to some of the evidence about standardized testing. We know standardized testing diverts time and important education resources away from student supports and real learning. We know students become anxious when their standardized tests are looming, and this doesn’t help them prepare for everyday learning they need to be ready for. And, Mr. Speaker, the evidence is clear. Other provinces and even the US [United States] states are walking away from standardized testing because it’s just not the right way to help students achieve what they need to do in our schools today.

Mr. Speaker, people in Saskatchewan want the minister to reconsider his support for standardized testing. Why can’t the Sask Party listen to people and do that?

The Speaker: I recognize the Minister of Education.

Hon. Mr. Marchuk: Again, Mr. Speaker, this isn’t just a testing program. It is a student achievement initiative, Mr. Speaker. It involves many facets of a student’s life.

But beyond that, Mr. Speaker, we have examples of success in our province. Chinook School Division, for example, is using a balanced literacy approach to help improve reading results and scores for their children — 21 per cent increase in reading scores over the course of four years. Mr. Speaker, Regina Public’s using the early years evaluation tool to help assess students for readiness to enter the mainstream programming. Prairie Valley School Division, Mr. Speaker — 23 of 26 achievement initiatives showed an increase in student results.

Mr. Speaker, it’s as simple as it’s good for students. Mr. Speaker, we’re going to go down that road.