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Standardized Testing and Student Achievement

Mr. Forbes: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. While no one from the Sask Party can explain their expensive standardized testing scheme, they do know it'll cost \$12 million in the first three years alone. And when people have concerns about this expense and the usefulness about these tests, the Sask Party government just doesn't seem to listen.

The Premier admitted in his estimates last week, he has not met with the Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation about standardized tests. And, Mr. Speaker, because teachers will be giving the tests, it just makes sense their concerns about standardized testing should be listened to. Mr. Speaker, why won't the Sask Party government listen to the STF [Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation] and talk with the STF when it comes to their expensive 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. Mr. Speaker, we do have a student advisory committee that we have been in constant consultation with since the announcement last spring, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, the student achievement initiative is really an investment in students. It's a consistent process, Mr. Speaker, for gathering data about student learning. It's about informing the instructional process, Mr. Speaker. It's a comprehensive program that will span all of the grades from pre-kindergarten to grade 12, Mr. Speaker. And furthermore, Mr. Speaker, it's a balanced approach to student success. It involves the curriculum, it involves assessment, and it involves instruction, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, parents want to know, teachers want to know, students want to know how they're doing. And we will continue that investment in our children's education, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: I recognize the member for Saskatoon Centre.

Mr. Forbes: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Well it isn't just the STF the Sask Party government ignores. There's a wide agreement among educators and professors at our universities that standardized testing is not the way to go.

Professors at both of the province's universities have spoken out against the tests, and over 1,700 members of the public have signed a petition opposed to the Sask Party plan. And even when the ministry prepared a list of the academic research to show the minister, he hasn't read them.

Mr. Speaker, the research showed that the overwhelming consensus from education experts is that standardized testing just doesn't make sense. So, Mr. Speaker, why would the Sask Party rush, rush ahead with standardized testing when so many people are against it?

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. Mr. Speaker, student achievement, the program that we are proposing, does work. We have evidence of that throughout our province. To cite a couple of examples, Mr. Speaker, Chinook School Division, with its balanced literacy approach to reading, has seen an increase of 21 per cent over its four years, Mr. Speaker, in reading levels. In 2008, Mr. Speaker, they had 63 per cent of students meeting or exceeding grade level in reading. Four years later, 84 per cent increase in reading.

Mr. Speaker, as I said, the student achievement initiative is not just about testing or assessments. It's about finding information out about student engagement. Without student engagement, Mr. Speaker, students simply don't succeed. The Tell Them from Me survey, which is part of the student achievement initiative, will provide us invaluable information as to how students see their school, see the health of their community in the school, etc. Mr. Speaker, It's not just about an assessment program.

The Speaker: I recognize the member for Saskatoon Centre.

Mr. Forbes: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. You know, we know there are gaps in education, especially when it comes to education outcomes for First Nations and Métis students. And that's exactly why teachers and parents want to identify the gaps and work to close them and not waste precious resources on the Sask Party's pet project of standardized testing.

Mr. Speaker, we now know it'll cost \$12 million in the first three years alone and millions more in the following years, just for the software. The Sask Party's expensive standardized testing will take precious resources away from the priorities of today's classrooms in Saskatchewan. And teachers and educators and parents believe the Sask Party's standardized testing just doesn't make any sense. So why is the Sask Party so focused on standardized testing when there's so many other areas in education they should be paying attention to?

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. Mr. Speaker, student achievement is not just about assessment. Mr. Speaker, this is an investment in our students' future. It's about investing in our students and how they move forward. And it's about allowing us to gather the kinds of information that is going to be necessary to provide the supports that teachers need to inform instruction, that parents will need to help with their students at home, Mr. Speaker, and for students themselves to be able to look at what they're doing so that they can move from one level to the next with the proper supports, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, we need this information so that we're able to track progress year over year, Mr. Speaker. It's an important initiative. It's not an either-or, Mr. Speaker, it's an investment in our students' success as they move forward.