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Student Population Increases and Support for Education

Mr. Forbes: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, the Minister of Education wants standardized testing, even though he has yet to give a single reason why the province should be going down this path other jurisdictions are rejecting.

Teachers know if there are more resources available for education they should be put into learning, not into preparing students for exams. But the Sask Party has nothing but platitudes as why it's barrelling ahead with standardized testing. The minister's answers so far have been, and I quote, "Evidence to support enhanced outcomes is evident," and "Investing in school infrastructure is an investment." Nothing but platitudes, Mr. Speaker.

And meanwhile, Mr. Speaker, the classrooms are packed with students, a clear sign that the Sask Party has its priorities mixed up. Now to the question: why does the Sask Party have time to entertain standardized testing and not standardized class sizes?

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, Mr. Speaker, the success of Saskatchewan students is a priority for this government. All Saskatchewan students are a priority for this government.

We need to get a couple of things straight. We have significant growth in this province, Mr. Speaker, and that is a great thing. And so we need to continue to support education, so much so, Mr. Speaker, that we've increased funding, operating funding to schools, by 21 per cent since coming into government — \$258 million, Mr. Speaker, for student supports since coming into government, Mr. Speaker. We have more teachers today in Saskatchewan schools, Mr. Speaker, than ever before — 469 more teachers, Mr. Speaker. And we are committed to supporting the learning outcomes of our students and we will continue to move forward in that regard.

The Speaker: If the members on either side of the House want to carry on a conversation, they can leave the Assembly and do so in the rotunda. I recognize the member for Saskatoon Centre.

Mr. Forbes: Mr. Speaker, we have 350 less educational assistants since they took government. Mr. Speaker, in the schoolyard around the province are more young children, and we think that's a good thing too. And we're happy to see this province growing. But the Sask Party can't seem to manage its growth. And many schools, kindergartens and other grades, are bursting at the seams.

Mr. Speaker, at Dr. John G. Egnatoff in Saskatoon we understand there'll be 95 kindergarten students there in the fall. The already large number of portable classrooms will make schools congested. That means the school board must pack in more kids who need one-on-one teaching to help them start their learning. To the minister: why are families being told to make the best of a crowded situation in schools? Where is the planning for our education system?

The Speaker: I recognize the Minister of Education.

Hon. Mr. Marchuk: Again, Mr. Speaker, in reference to the student achievement initiative, the student achievement initiative is just one support. There are many supports that our government is committing to education. And let's get the record straight. Again, special ed supports, \$258 million, Mr. Speaker. That's an increase of 4 per cent, not a cut. Twenty-one per cent increase in operating funding to schools, Mr. Speaker, not a cut.

School divisions have hired more educators, more professionals, paraprofessionals, and educational assistants, Mr. Speaker. Since 2008-09 there are actually 19 more educational assistants in our schools than before. There are 439 more regular teachers, 86 more student support teachers, Mr. Speaker. I think that evidence is fairly clear that we are committed to the success of Saskatchewan students in our schools.

The Speaker: I recognize the member for Saskatoon Centre.

Mr. Forbes: Well I am amazed that the minister is impressed by the number of 19 educational assistants in this province that's growing the way it is. What an impressive number. Mr. Speaker, parents and teachers know with crowded classrooms there's less time to focus on the individual needs of the students. And following the Sask Party's mistake of cutting 350 educational assistants — and now they say 19, which they will still refuse to admit that they've done — that one-on-one learning with teachers and students is just simply spread too thin.

Only the Sask Party would think cramming in more students into a classroom is somehow a good thing for students, and only the Sask Party would think forcing those students to undergo standardized testing would somehow magically improve outcomes. Mr. Speaker, why is the Minister of Education pushing forward with standardized testing for students instead of lowering class sizes and giving teachers and students the breathing room for real learning?

The Speaker: I recognize the Minister of Education.

Hon. Mr. Marchuk: Mr. Speaker, this government is planning for growth. I was Chair of a board when we were losing in the neighbourhood of 2,000 to 3,000 students annually, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, the other day we had four leading educators in your gallery, Mr. Speaker — four educational leaders from around the province that are leading the charge in success for student outcomes. Mr. Speaker, the evidence that they are producing, the evidence that their teachers in the field are actually enacting with our students is remarkable and quite dramatic, Mr. Speaker. Chinook School Division, for example, moved 63 per cent success rate to 84 per cent in the span of four years. Prairie Valley School Division, another school division, Mr. Speaker, out of 26 student achievement initiatives, 23 have been increased. Mr. Speaker, the evidence is really quite clear, quite accurate, and quite dramatic and we'll stick to that, Mr. Speaker.