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DEBATES and PROCEEDINGS

(HANSARD) Published under the authority of The Honourable Dan D'Autremont Speaker

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Testing Standards and Support for Education

Mr. Forbes: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Parents and teachers continue to be concerned about the Sask Party government's plan to spend millions of dollars on standardized testing. In the committee last week, the minister's officials revealed a new fact when they said 400,000 of those dollars are going to be used for communications. Mr. Speaker, taxpayers are now on the hook for another \$400,000 for spin and PR [public relations] to help the Sask Party justify why it's introducing wide-ranging standardized testing in Saskatchewan schools.

To the minister: why would the government need \$400,000 for spin and PR for standardized testing?

The Speaker: I recognize the Minister of Education.

Hon. Mr. Marchuk: Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the member opposite for the question. You know, the student achievement initiative that the province of Saskatchewan is undertaking is a comprehensive program, Mr. Speaker. It spans the spectrum from pre-kindergarten through grade 12. It's just not an assessment program, Mr. Speaker. It involves the student engagement, measuring student engagement, Mr. Speaker. It involves early years assessment, Mr. Speaker. It involves identifying those vulnerable children where we can put the proper supports, Mr. Speaker. And all of that requires some information, Mr. Speaker. So the money spent on communication, Mr. Speaker, is a good investment to the program.

The Speaker: I recognize the member for Saskatoon Centre.

Mr. Forbes: Mr. Speaker, people have real question about \$400,000 when there's so many things that need to be done in our schools. Mr. Speaker, the minister revealed another new fact last night in the committee when he admitted the Sask Party government will be releasing the results of the new standardized tests.

Mr. Speaker, the concern to many people I've been hearing from is they worry that the test results will be used to pit school against school and to publicly shame students who haven't performed as well as others for a variety of reasons. The minister has been silent, silent about the concern over publishing the results of standardized tests, even though he knows schools will have to be putting out the results in the public. The minister said the ministry will not rank the schools, but he knows very well third parties are interested in just doing that.

Mr. Speaker, does the Sask Party government understand the potential consequences in publishing the results of standardized testing?

The Speaker: I recognize the Minister of Education.

Hon. Mr. Marchuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thanks to the member opposite. Again, Mr. Speaker, I need to assure everyone in this Chamber and the people of Saskatchewan, this program is not about ranking schools. It's not about ranking teachers, and it's not about allocating funding to resources.

Mr. Speaker, this program is a comprehensive, holistic program that will identify the resources and supports that teachers, parents will utilize to be able to support student achievement going forward, Mr. Speaker.

We will continue to move in the direction that will allow us to provide and gather data that will inform that instruction and validate curriculum, Mr. Speaker. It's an important initiative, and we intend to be able to provide results at the individual level so that parents are going to be able to make the decisions that they need to support their children. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: I recognize the member for Saskatoon Centre.

Mr. Forbes: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. But he knows third parties will be out there ranking schools, and he should be doing something about that.

But we know now, Mr. Speaker, that the minister says, and he has said that he intends to spend \$12 million by 2016 to administer these standardized tests. Despite repeated requests from me and many of those who are concerned, the minister has yet been able to provide a credible vision to support this plan.

We in the public have heard from education professors, teachers, parents, education specialists, and families who recognize that standardized testing is an outdated concept that doesn't meet and doesn't benefit students here in our province. The minister's officials also revealed that they've already spent \$950,000 on this scheme last year, and the testing hasn't even started yet. The tally of taxpayers' dollars keep adding up and there's no good explanation of that benefit.

So, Mr. Speaker, to the minister: does he believe that this \$12 million will be well spent?

The Speaker: I recognize the Minister of Education.

Hon. Mr. Marchuk: Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, the opposition critic said this about school divisions and their standards-based testing and approaches to student achievement, the exact things that we'll be doing at the provincial level, and let me quote, Mr. Speaker:

. . . this is something that's very important, that we want our students to achieve. And it's great they're making that commitment to do that with the additional resources to make sure that happens and there is a balance between testing and teaching.

Mr. Speaker, and that's exactly what we're doing. Mr. Speaker, the past president of the Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation, Steve Allen, said last May that our new approach to provincial assessment was going to measure students' success by looking at ". . . how we have grown, where we are doing well, and where we need to do more work," Mr. Speaker. Again, support.

During this time . . . and if I may quote from Liam Choo-Foo, director of education with Chinook School Division:

During this time [Mr. Speaker] there was anxiety over this initial change, which was expected. But now I can categorically state that this initiative has been the greatest transformational change in teaching practice that I have witnessed.

Mr. Speaker, that's the kind of support that we need to have going forward for our children, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: I recognize the member for Saskatoon Centre.

Mr. Forbes: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. And I do appreciate being quoted because, you know, as a teacher from the Saskatoon Public School Board, we do believe in assessment — not this standardized, wide-based kind of testing. I'd be curious for the minister to quote the current president of the STF [Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation]. What does he say about this?

The Speaker: I recognize the Minister of Education.

Hon. Mr. Marchuk: Thanks again, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, our support for education going forward is unquestioned, Mr. Speaker. We've increased operating funding to schools by twenty-three and a half per cent, Mr. Speaker. That goes to supports in the classroom, Mr. Speaker. Over 65 per cent of our K to 12 [kindergarten to grade 12] schools are repaired, Mr. Speaker — \$600 million in the last six years, Mr. Speaker, 263.6 per cent increase over the NDP, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, we will continue to invest in our students. We will continue to invest in our classrooms. We will continue to support our teachers as we go forward, Mr. Speaker. Thank you.

The Speaker: I recognize the member for Saskatoon Centre.

Mr. Forbes: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I didn't hear what the current president of the STF has to say, now that we know what the real plan of this government is.

But we know last week the minister's officials admitted that Saskatchewan taxpayers will be paying an annual software licensing fee for the standardized testing scheme. The annual licence for data collection software will be \$900,000, each and every year. Mr. Speaker, this shows this government is more interested in paying for testing, administration, the software rather than teaching and building stronger classrooms.

Mr. Speaker, we've raised many concerns about the K to 12 education here in this Assembly, from packed classrooms to crumbling gymnasiums to the need for better supports for English as an additional language. And the pressures facing students, teachers, and the schools are simply overwhelming.

Mr. Speaker, why does the Sask Party have millions for software for standardized testing instead of supporting the real needs of today's students?

The Speaker: I recognize the Minister of Education.

Hon. Mr. Marchuk: Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, investment in infrastructure is key to the student achievement agenda, just like investment in infrastructure is key to providing the kind of environments that our children need to grow and learn in, Mr. Speaker.

And our government is very solid on its record. We've increased capital spending in the 2013-14 budget, Mr. Speaker, by \$7.2 million for a total of \$119 million, Mr. Speaker. In the Sask Party's six years, Mr. Speaker, we've invested \$600 million in capital; in their last six years, Mr. Speaker, \$165 million. Mr. Speaker, we've increased spending on new schools and major school renovations by 228 per cent, Mr. Speaker, over the NDP. Mr. Speaker, our record, \$450 million over six years; the NDP, \$137 million, Mr. Speaker. That's our record, and we'll stick with it.

The Speaker: I recognize the member for Saskatoon Centre.

Mr. Forbes: Mr. Speaker, we know the running tally for this experiment is \$7 million a year, and it hasn't begun yet. But we know in Manitoba in 1999 the government spent over \$10 million for standardized testing for four grades. And that happened just for one year over a decade ago.

To the minister: why does the Sask Party government have \$12 million for standardized testing when there's so many pressures on our classrooms today?

The Speaker: I recognize the Minister of Education.

Hon. Mr. Marchuk: Mr. Speaker, again our support for pre-K to 12 education in our province is pretty solid, Mr. Speaker. We have the second highest paid teachers in Western Canada, Mr. Speaker. Our record, over 65 per cent of all K to 12 schools are repaired. Again, Mr. Speaker — 155 pre-K [pre-kindergarten] programs under the NDP,

Mr. Speaker; 301 under our government.

And, Mr. Speaker, we know that the key to success moving forward is to provide for our early learners as they proceed through the education spectrum. Mr. Speaker, 264 per cent increase in K to 12 capital over the members opposite, Mr. Speaker. In the first year and a half of the Sask Party government we invested \$272 million, and it took them eight years to get close to that investment, Mr. Speaker. We stand by our record.