



**LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
of Prince Edward Island**

**Official Report of
Debates and Proceedings**

(Hansard)

Third Session of the 67th General Assembly

Tuesday, 26 May 2026

No. 34

The Honourable Brad Trivers, Speaker

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LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF PRINCE EDWARD ISLAND
67th General Assembly
Third Session

Lieutenant Governor – His Honour the Honourable Dr. Wassim Salamoun, O.P.E.I.

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Redmond , Hon. Jenn (PC)	Mermaid-Stratford (5)	Minister of Economic Development, Trade and Artificial Intelligence
Simpson , Carolyn (L)	Charlottetown-Hillsborough Park (9)	
Thompson , Hon. Bloyce (PC)	Stanhope-Marshfield (8)	Minister of Agriculture Minister of Justice, Public Safety and Attorney General
Trivers , Hon. Brad	Rustico-Emerald (18)	Speaker
Vacant	Cornwall-Meadowbank (16)	

[The Legislature met at 1:03 p.m.]

[Hon. B. Trivers in the chair]

Matters of Privilege and Recognition of Guests

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Justice, Public Safety and Attorney General.

Hon. B. Thompson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I'd like to welcome everyone to the gallery. I see we have Gerard Greenan, a former member. Welcome. I hope everyone enjoys some of the nice weather this week and lots of things happening across this Island.

It's with great sadness that we learned yesterday of the passing of Isabella. I offer my sincerest condolences to her family, Jesus and Alexandra, her friends, and her classmates as they grieve this tremendous loss. I also want to express my gratitude to the people of PEI for the way they have come together to support Isabella's family. Their kindness has been a source of comfort in this very painful, painful moment.

[1:05 p.m.]

On Saturday afternoon, Prince Edward Island got to welcome Maverick Bishop back home. After almost two years away waiting for – and receiving – a heart transplant, Maverick was finally able to return. Scenes from that homecoming were extraordinary. The streets were lined with his friends and neighbours and family members holding signs, cheering, and celebrating his return.

Maverick is an extraordinary individual, having received five open heart surgeries before his fifth birthday. At nine years old, he has lived a lifetime of resilience already. I want to extend a heartfelt welcome to his entire family.

Also, this morning, we learned of the passing of Forbes Kennedy. Forbie was a true fixture in the sports community throughout PEI. After his NHL career, you could always find Forbie at the local rinks and ball fields coaching young players, sharing stories, and simply enjoying the games he loved so deeply. His presence and his passion and his commitment, not just to hockey but to all sports, made a lasting impact to generations of Island families.

I want to extend my sincere condolences to Forbie's family and to his friends. His loss will be felt across our community.

And finally, I got to host 75 preschoolers yesterday at the farm. We had a lot of fun. We let the cows out, and they thought that was great. They thought my baby calves were fantastic. We went to see the horses, and before I could say don't touch the electric fence, 20 kids had their hands...

[Laughter]

Hon. B. Thompson: ...on the electric fence. But all in all, they had a wonderful time. I want to thank the teachers from L.M. Montgomery for bringing their kindergarten children. Each class got to name a calf. I got two names in this morning: Happy and Beyonce.

[Laughter]

Hon. B. Thompson: The other three are coming; they haven't decided.

I just want to say welcome, and enjoy today and the week here, Mr. Speaker. Thank you so much.

Speaker: Thank you, minister. Those greetings were nothing short of shocking.

The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Hon. H. Perry: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

It's a pleasure to rise today and welcome all those who are watching online and those who are joining in the gallery today. Welcome back, George. Gerard Greenan, former Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development – I think he was here from 2007 to 2015, I believe; represented Summerside-St. Eleanors. Welcome back. Phil Taylor, nice to see you again. Welcome to all of our guests here in the gallery today.

I, too, want to pass on my condolences to the family of Forbes Kennedy. He really was a true sports icon here on Prince Edward Island. He had a passion and a toughness for the game that did leave a lasting mark on Prince Edward Island and hockey from tip to tip. From coaching generations to his play in multiple NHL teams, he certainly made PEI proud. My condolences to

his family, to his friends, and to all his former teammates.

With that, I wish everyone a very productive day in the House. Thank you.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Third Party.

M. MacFarlane: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Welcome back to all my colleagues and everyone in the Legislature here this afternoon. Also, welcome to those in the gallery. Gerard Greenan, great to see you out. I hope you were able to get that bread sliced at the farmers market that we were looking at on Saturday morning there. Great to see you, Gerard, and everyone here today, and everybody watching online.

A couple of events I would like to highlight for the Legislature this afternoon:

On the weekend, I attended the Allan and Tracy MacKenzie Walk/Run for Autism here in Charlottetown. A wonderful event again. Big turnout – more runners, I think, than even last year. All proceeds went towards maintaining Project LifeSaver PEI. It was a beautiful day to be out walking, and those who were able to run, to run. I'd like to thank the organizers, including Tammy Ferguson from Victoria, out my way, for all of her work in supporting this event.

Also, coming up is the Cornwall and Area Watershed annual general meeting, Thursday, May 28th, at 6:30 p.m. at the Milton Community Hall. Along with updates on local watershed projects, the guest speaker will be Gwen Vessey, coordinator of the PEI Agri-Watershed Partnership Program, who will share how soil conservation practices are helping to build healthier soils, fight climate change, and reduce the agricultural runoff into our waterways.

[1:10 p.m.]

Also coming up tonight at seven o'clock, the Abram's Village Craft Co-operative is holding their AGM at the craft store. Everyone is welcome to attend. Artists can drop off their crafts on June 10th and 12th. The store opens for the season on June 15th. This is the 62nd anniversary this year of the Craft Co-operative.

Finally, I would like to just give an acknowledgment to the many students from across the province who were recently honoured

at the 2026 Provincial Heritage Fair. This year there were 216 students from grades 5 through 10 representing 25 schools who participated in the fair. They presented a total of 176 heritage-themed projects exploring a wide range of topics related to Prince Edward Island and Canadian history.

It's a wonderful event, and a lot of engagement from the students, a lot of excellent projects, too many to list here. I appreciate that the government put out a statement and a release on it for more information. I would offer congratulations to all the students who participated and everyone who made that heritage fair happen.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm wishing everyone a great day of debate here this afternoon.

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Economic Development, Trade and Artificial Intelligence.

Hon. J. Redmond: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

It's a pleasure to welcome everyone back to the House today, my colleagues, those tuning in from beautiful District 5 Mermaid-Stratford, to our guests in the gallery, especially my dad, George Dignan, who has been a regular, friendly face this session.

Also, I wanted to rise – as many have mentioned in here, there's been a lot of graduations occurring, and post-secondary certainly was a hat I used to wear and participate a lot in the graduations. I just want to congratulate all the students and the staff on a successful year. I have no doubt that they will go forward and be bold and brave, and they will be amazing to the sectors they have studied, and hopefully they'll stay here on beautiful PEI.

Also, I just want to send a quick thank you out to Heidi Wood. Heidi Wood is a Town of Stratford employee who works dedicated hours to ensure that our town stays beautiful, and I just wanted to give her a little shout-out for that and thank her.

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Education and Early Years.

Hon. R. Croucher: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

I just want to take a moment to acknowledge students, staff, and school administration today

after an incredibly difficult week in Island schools. Over the last three days, there were two tragic deaths, one involving a student and the other a long-time bus driver. Both are heartbreaking situations that have affected so many people in so many ways. My heart goes out to the families, communities, and schools affected by these tragic events. Our entire province grieves with you.

I also want to share my deep gratitude to anyone supporting students, staff, and families during this time, like our student well-being teams, school counsellors, educational authority staff, and everyone else who has helped people through the grief, mourning, and trauma being experienced these last few days. The work you do and the care you take is invaluable, and I thank you so much for all the support you provide in difficult times like these.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Georgetown-Pownal.

B. Curran: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

It's a pleasure to rise and recognize everybody watching from home, especially those in District 2 Georgetown-Pownal.

I rise today because – and it's been mentioned a number of times in this House – I want to send my sympathies to the family of Forbes Kennedy, especially his sons Gary and Mike, his daughters Carol Ann and Donna, and especially his brother Jamie, who is a friend of many people in this House.

Mr. Speaker, I'll be brief, but last weekend at the Pownal Sports Centre was the Aaron MacMillan Memorial Hockey Tournament that raises money for Pownal minor hockey. Aaron succumbed to a battle with cancer a number of years ago, and his family puts on this hockey tournament every year to raise money. I have to say, Aaron was a relative of mine, and he's greatly missed by his entire friends and family.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Land and Environment.

Hon. D. Compton: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Welcome back to all my colleagues, everyone watching from District 4 – I'm guessing there probably aren't very many because it's a nice day, but to know that I'm thinking about them – but most especially, welcoming the gallery guests, but especially my uncle JJ, and my cousin John Douglas. Well, they call John, but I call him Douglas. He's here from B.C. and decided to come in and see what we did in here. John has been in Pitt Meadows – for how long?

[Interjection]

Hon. D. Compton: Long time – yeah, 47 years – and he keeps threatening to move home. It hasn't happened yet, but I'm hoping some day it will. Anyway, it's great to have you here, John and JJ, and I hope everyone has a great day.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-Victoria Park.

K. Bernard: Thank you.

[1:15 p.m.]

Welcome back to my colleagues and staff and our Pages, Jorja, Jisele, and Zachary, today – thank you for being here – everybody tuning in from all around the Island, especially those in District 12, and a special welcome to everyone joining us in the gallery today. Thank you for being here.

I just wanted to mention very briefly, I had the opportunity with the Member from Charlottetown-Belvedere to attend the Special Olympics Rickey Burns 5-pin bowling championships, and it was incredible the energy in the room.

Upstairs – they do it every year. They pick three health things to focus on every year, and athletes can go and have their health measured. Then, if follow-ups are required, Special Olympics facilitates that. My mind was blown. I can't believe the service. Just when you think that this organization can't do more for the community, they do, and I think that it's a great example of preventative health. Imagine what this could look like on a bigger, rolled-out, phased-in stage.

With that, I wish everyone a good day and thank Special Olympics for the great work they do.

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Fisheries, Rural Development and Tourism.

Hon. E. Hudson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

It is, as always, a pleasure to rise here in the Legislature. I want to say hello to everyone who may be tuning in from beautiful District 26 Alberton-Bloomfield. It's great to see the ones in the gallery here today. George, great to see you back once again.

Earlier today, I had the pleasure to attend the kick-off for the 30th PEI Shellfish Festival, which is running this September, from September 17th-20th. I had the opportunity to bring greetings on behalf of the Province, had a lobster roll, and had a feed of delicious PEI oysters. Just in closing, I do want to thank Liam and Kim Dolan for all the work that they have done to bring this festival to the point that it has been. Certainly, it is appreciated.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Finance and Affordability.

Hon. J. BurrIDGE: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I rise today to recognize a remarkable young Islander from my district, Benjamin Alain, on being named a recipient of the prestigious Currie Undergraduate Scholarship at the University of New Brunswick. This is valued at \$75,000. I think he's one of four that were picked for this. It does a full cost for a four-year undergraduate degree and is awarded to exceptional Atlantic Canadians who demonstrate leadership, academic achievement, community involvement, and perseverance. This is an absolutely outstanding achievement, and I know it's because of Ben's hard work and dedication and talents that he has.

I have the pleasure of knowing some of Ben's family – his mother Lucy, his aunt Julie, and cousin Sophie. As an alumna of UNB engineering, this certainly resonates with me. What an accomplishment and what an opportunity it is for Ben.

Congratulations, Ben, and I wish you all the best.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-Belvedere.

S. Dillon: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I'm happy to rise today to welcome my colleagues back for a great day of debate, those in the gallery, and those watching online.

I was going to mention the Special Olympics event, but I think it's been touched on, and so has the Allan and Tracy MacKenzie walk. That was a beautiful day, and it was for a great cause on Project Lifesaver. But I do want to mention that Adam MacKenzie, who works in our office, kind of spearheads that every year, and I want to thank him for the great work he does.

The Charlottetown fire department put out a post, and it stated: "A small but meaningful first with the engine's backseat in station 2 filled entirely with female firefighters." Station 2 is in the district that I represent, and I want to say that I know we are in great hands.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Summerside-Wilmot.

T. DesRoches: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I just wanted to rise and welcome everybody back into the proceedings and everybody watching from home, especially my faithfuls, Joan, Kathy, and Elizabeth, who watch every day. It's not too often I get someone from District 21 in and he's already been mentioned, but welcome to Gerard.

Also, we had a District 21 resident who added some more accolades to his totals. Dan McCarthy, an avid cyclist and avid runner who finished top for North America in Spain last year in the duathlon, was over in Baddeck, Nova Scotia, this weekend where his team finished 28th out of 70 over there in the run they have at the Cabot Trail.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Statements by Members

Speaker: The hon. Member from Georgetown-Pownal.

Vernon River Lions Club

B. Curran: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[1:20 p.m.]

In District 2, we know that the heart of a community is often found in the organizations that step up when there is a need to be filled. Today, I rise to recognize one such pillar of our community: the Vernon River Lions Club.

Since 1972, the members of this club have lived by the simple but profound motto: “We serve.” Whether it’s hosting their functions with White Cross, supporting the local Vernon River School, or ensuring that families in need have off-Island travel medical costs covered, the Lions are always there. They are the first to roll up their sleeves and the last to leave when the work is done.

What makes the Vernon River Lions so special is their commitment to our youth and our seniors alike. From providing scholarships to local students to maintaining the community spaces that bring us all together, they are the glue that holds our rural fabric tight. They don’t do it for the accolades; they do it because they believe in the value of community and the importance of looking out for one’s neighbour.

To the fellow Lions of the Vernon River Lions Club who have donned the purple and yellow vests over the years: thank you. Your dedication and your countless hours of service do not go unnoticed. You have built a legacy of integrity and kindness, and that serves as an example for all of us in this Chamber.

I ask all the members of this House to join me in celebrating the Vernon River Lions Club for their unwavering commitment to District 2 and for making Prince Edward Island a better place to call home.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Tyne Valley-Sherbrooke.

Equal Access to Oyster Seed and Supports

H. MacLennan: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The arrival of MSX and Dermo has forced our oyster industry into a tough spot, but the recent approval to import disease-resistant seed from the U.S. offers a light at the end of the tunnel. We know that Atlantic Aqua Farms is moving forward with 50 million Rutgers-line seeds. We also know there is \$4.2 million in government support to help the fishers cover the cost. But for the growers, the concern isn’t just about the if, it’s about the how.

I want to be very clear: every fisher in PEI deserves a fair shot at this. We have a mix of operations in our area, some large and some small family leases. Access to this seed shouldn’t be determined by who has the most leverage. It must be available to every harvester ready to work.

I’m calling on the federal agency of ACOA to ensure that distribution and financial assistance are tailored so small-scale growers aren’t crowded out.

In PEI, we look out for our neighbours, so let’s ensure this recovery keeps our entire community afloat.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-West Royalty.

Importance of Health Promotion

G. McNeilly: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Right now, our health care system is overwhelmed – overcrowded hospitals, long wait times, frontline workers stretched beyond their limit – and yet this government still has no provincial wellness strategy.

If this government is serious about improving health care in Prince Edward Island, it cannot continue focusing almost entirely on illness after people reach a crisis point. This government cannot continue ignoring prevention while the health care system falls deeper into crisis.

That means supporting physical activity for seniors, improving access to recreation and mental health programs, investing in addiction prevention, and helping communities build healthier lives before people end up in emergency rooms and hospital. There are no extras; this is an essential part of a functioning health care system. They are practical investments that reduce chronic disease, improve mental health, reduce isolation, and ease pressure on the health care system, but instead of building a balanced health care system that values prevention and wellness, this government continues to operate almost entirely in crisis management mode.

Prevention is not separate from health care; it is one of the most important parts of it. Until this government starts treating wellness and

prevention as a real priority, Islanders continue to pay the price through overcrowded hospitals, longer wait times, and a health care system that remains stuck in crisis.

I ask this government to please reinstate the health promotion funding. Our future quality of life depends on it.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Responses to Questions Taken as Notice

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Land and Environment.

Shale pit violations

Hon. D. Compton: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Last week, the hon. Member from New Haven-Rocky Point asked me about shale pits, and I've learned a lot.

Excavation cannot occur within eight metres horizontally from an adjacent property boundary, 300 metres from a residence, 500 metres from a church, school, public park or cemetery. Organic matter such as culled potatoes or manure, et cetera, cannot be disposed of in excavation pits, to protect groundwater from excess nitrates and other contaminants. Any material that enters a shale pit must be inert, such as earthen material, concrete rubble, et cetera. Construction material or other waste is prohibited from being deposited in an excavation pit.

[1:25 p.m.]

The excavation pit regulations do not apply to landowners who operate pits for personal use. Examples of personal use include farmers requiring sand and shale for sanding icy driveways, landowners subdividing property and developing their own property for residential lots, et cetera. The department considers commercial pits as those where fill or shale material is removed for sale and sold in a business transaction. The department would investigate any situation where a landowner was purposely skirting the regulations by declaring a pit as personal use when it was being used commercially.

Questions by Members

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Hon. H. Perry: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

The more Islanders question, or are asking questions about the budget, the harder it seems to be to get a straight answer from this government.

One minister says there are no real cuts, another says programs are being reduced. Meanwhile, Islanders are watching supports disappear while government still refuses to provide a full list of what is actually being scaled back. At this point, it's starting to look like the government either doesn't know what it's cutting or doesn't want Islanders to know.

Budget transparency (further)

Question to the Minister of Finance: If government is so proud of this budget, why won't it simply table a complete list of cuts and reductions for Islanders to see?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Finance and Affordability.

Hon. J. Burrridge: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

We do table it in that we bring the whole budget – all the supporting documents – to the table to ask questions in an open manner every year. Every spring and every fall, that's what's done. Within a \$3.8 billion budget, there are ups and downs. We have already stated that we are ending some programs, there's been some reductions to some programs, and there's been some pausing to programs. We've been very open and transparent about that.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Hon. H. Perry: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

But if they're open and transparent, they would just list it. This government is treating the list of cuts like it's classified information.

The government keeps telling Islanders to focus on the billions being spent while refusing to clearly explain what services, programs, and supports are being reduced at the very same time. That's not transparency; that's a government hoping Islanders did not notice what is quietly disappearing in the background.

Islanders should not need a calculator or a spreadsheet or three weeks of budget estimates to understand what government is taking away from them.

A question to the Minister of Finance: Will the minister commit today to publicly releasing a full departmental breakdown of every cut, reduction, and paused program in the government, yes or no?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Finance and Affordability.

Hon. J. Burridge: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

All the information is there and in front of everyone. You have all the time in the world to ask questions about programs within government as we work through this operating budget. All the departments come to the table with their CFO and their minister to ask any of those questions that are there. All the takebacks, actually, are coming next day or in two days. In Question Period, we'll get questions. The takebacks are coming back a couple of days later. All those answers are being given.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Hon. H. Perry: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

But we're coming to the end of May and that's two months after the fiscal, and Islanders still don't know fully. We have many departments yet to come on the floor.

This government keeps pointing to new Island essentials benefit as though it somehow replaces the programs that they just cut, but let's put it into perspective. For those who qualify, the maximum benefit works out to roughly a dollar a day. Does this government seriously believe a dollar a day is going to offset rising electricity costs, helping Islanders invest in energy upgrades or solve the affordability problem that they created?

Fiscal management (further)

Question to the Minister of Energy: Why is this government replacing long-term energy program with what looks like a cheap political gimmick rather than an actual solution?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Transportation, Infrastructure, and Energy.

Hon. E. Hudson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

There's never been a government in the history of this province that has put more into energy programs. You look over the last seven years, combined with federal contributions, in excess of \$35 million. Of that \$35 million, I believe in the vicinity of \$25 million to \$26 million – provincial programs. We have led every government across the country on a per capita basis on the number of programs, number of dollars that we have put into energy systems, energy rebates for Islanders.

Islanders deserve that, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Hon. H. Perry: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

This government wants credit for all their spending, but they don't want any of the blame for the cuts.

[1:30 p.m.]

Islanders were promised a series of long-term energy strategy and relief. Instead, what they are getting is cancelled programs, rising costs, pressure on the grid, and a government acting like a dollar a day somehow makes up for all of it. The reality is Islanders are starting to look at these decisions and wonder whether anybody around Cabinet actually thought this through.

Question to the Minister of Energy: How is cutting energy programs and handing Islanders a dollar a day supposed to pass as a serious affordability plan?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Transportation, Infrastructure and Energy.

Hon. E. Hudson: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

As the Minister of Finance has stated numerous times here, the information that is provided to the opposition and to the third party for review in advance of any department taking the budget onto the floor provides them details that no other opposition parties have ever had before. It gives them the opportunity to formulate questions, to review, and to do what the opposition's role is,

and that is to hold government to account, which they are doing.

We will continue down this road of transparency, of providing information to the opposition and to Islanders, Mr. Speaker.

Thank you.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Hon. H. Perry: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, but I think this minister is two questions behind.

The question that I asked him was: How is cutting energy programs and handing Islanders a dollar a day supposed to pass as a serious affordability plan? But I'm going to move on.

The reality here is pretty simple: if fewer Islanders can afford heat pumps, solar installations, and efficiency upgrades, then fewer Islanders will make those changes. If fewer Islanders make those changes, this government's emission targets become harder to reach.

Question to the Minister of Energy: What analysis has government done on how these cuts will impact Prince Edward Island's ability to meet its 2030 emission targets, and will the minister table it?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Transportation, Infrastructure and Energy.

Hon. E. Hudson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Leader of the Opposition is quite right when he talks about the number of heat pumps that this government has funded for Islanders right across the Island, from tip to tip – again, unprecedented by any government. We have been there with regard to energy systems. He has used the term with regard to heat pumps, and we will continue to be there. I'm sure that he has taken a look at the department's budget, and he will see the multi-millions of dollars that are still in my department's budget for energy programs.

Thank you.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Hon. H. Perry: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

But my question was: How are they going to meet their 2030 emissions target? I'm going to move on to another question.

Islanders were told those energy programs were essential – essential to lowering emissions, essential to lowering power bills, essential to reducing pressure on the grid. Now this government is cutting them away and every minister seems to have a different explanation why. What Islanders are starting to see is the same pattern everywhere with this government on energy, on housing, on health care, on affordability – big announcements, confused priorities, and a government that increasingly looks like it does not know what it's doing.

Question to the Minister of Energy: If these programs were truly essential, why were they among the first things that this government chose to cut?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Transportation, Infrastructure and Energy.

Hon. E. Hudson: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

As I've said before, the programs that this government has put in place with regard to energy – heat pumps being an example – are unprecedented. Any programs that have been put in place, are they going to be there forever and a day? Most likely not. But again, I do reiterate: the number of dollars that this government has put into energy programs over the last number of years is unparalleled, and if the Leader of the Opposition, the third party – I do hope they have reviewed the department budget – see that there are still multi-millions of dollars in this budget for energy programs.

Thank you.

Speaker: The hon. Member from O'Leary-Inverness.

R. Henderson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

This Legislature has had many debates on the merits of sick notes regardless of their requirement, their redundancy in the health care system, and as stated in this House by Dr. Dingwell, doctors are not really doing a diagnosis but rather documenting what the patient was requesting. But it's not only PEI employers that are asking for sick notes.

Medical notes for social services

Question to the Minister of Social Development:
Does your department request medical notes from persons seeking services of financial support from your department?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Social Development and Seniors.

Hon. B. Ramsay: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

No.

[1:35 p.m.]

Speaker: The hon. Member from O'Leary-Inverness.

R. Henderson: Well, that's very interesting, Mr. Speaker.

I have a constituent who's a single mom with children and is receiving social assistance. She has been diagnosed with PTSD and has severe mental health complications from her traumatic experience, but every three months her social worker requires her to provide a doctor's note to verify the condition preventing her from work. That's four times a year.

Question to the Minister of Social Development:
With all of the difficulty of getting access to a doctor, do you feel it makes sense to require a client on assistance for a few years to continue getting medical notes to keep their assistance, as the stress that it has on the client to get that doctor's note exacerbates her PTSD?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Social Development and Seniors.

Hon. B. Ramsay: Mr. Speaker, thank you for that question, and I'll look into that because I certainly was not aware of that. But I'll look into it.

Thank you.

Speaker: The hon. Member from O'Leary-Inverness.

R. Henderson: Well, Mr. Speaker, I'd certainly encourage this minister to get on top of her file and talk to her department. She has been a minister for some time in that department. I appreciate her efforts in trying to help people on assistance, but what is even more concerning is

the lack of services for clients in need of assistance when it comes to helping these clients with their mental health needs.

This client has a diagnosis of PTSD but has been on a list to get access to health care professional services paid for by the Province for over a year. No treatment has commenced, and she also is one of those 35,000 Islanders without a family doctor. Social Services knows all this, and she hasn't received a bit of treatment. No doctor, yet they want to force her to go to an emergency room every three months.

Question to the Minister of Social Development:
Does this make any sense? Social workers have over 100 clients each and feel that this is just a waste of their time, as well as their client's time. Why would you implement such a policy for medical reconfirmation of a diagnosis with no treatment ever having started?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Social Development and Seniors.

Hon. B. Ramsay: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

If a client comes to the department and says that they aren't well, we have to find out what the concerns are because otherwise we'd have lots and lots coming to the department saying that they're not well, and we'd just be giving taxpayers' money at verbatim. We can't do that, so we have to keep track of that.

Thank you.

Speaker: The hon. Member from O'Leary-Inverness.

R. Henderson: The whole point of this is the person has a diagnosis. The Department of Social Services understands the diagnosis, but because they can't get access to health care services, they're sitting back having to wait and wait. But yet they still have to go to an emergency room to get a doctor's note.

Minister: Will you reverse this policy and make some common sense until...? Now, if the person was receiving treatment, I can certainly see every so often that they would be able to get an update from their doctor, but not when they haven't started any treatment.

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Social Development and Seniors.

Hon. B. Ramsay: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Our policies are assessed once a year, annually, so we will certainly look at trying to streamline that if it helps, but we'll certainly look at that.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-West Royalty.

G. McNeilly: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Safety is very important, especially in the working conditions, especially in long-term care. In my area, in Prince Edward Home, staff, residents, have been coming to me with safety concerns and the minister I do believe is well aware of it.

Long-term care (further)

Question to the Minister of Health: What are you doing for the safety of residents and staff at the PE Home regarding a situation that you said was going to be fixed a week ago, and nothing has happened. Can you give us an update?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Hon. C. Deagle: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I know that I did say that that one individual would be moved by that certain date, and that hasn't happened. There's a lot more behind the scenes happening, and a lot more complications which is making it very difficult.

I'm not going to get into the specifics, but they are working to try and move this one individual. The issue being: Where can he go? But until that happens, there is 24/7 security and more supports that have been put in place to help the staff in this difficult situation.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-West Royalty.

G. McNeilly: Thank you very much.

I know it is a delicate situation. I was there yesterday for a lot of time; I talked with families and residents, and they are quite concerned.

So, if that is the update – and I know it's difficult – what am I to tell families that believe that it was supposed to be done last week when

it hasn't been? How close are you to fixing this situation? Because it's dire for them.

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

[1:40 p.m.]

Hon. C. Deagle: What I would tell them, Mr. Speaker, is they're working around the clock to try and find an alternative location for this individual. Usually nothing is ever as easy as it sounds or that we think it can be. We just don't want to move one issue to another facility, so there's that concern as well.

I do know that at Health PEI, they're truly working around the clock to try and solve this situation. I know how frustrating it is for the staff and the residents in that home. We definitely hear their concerns. We know it's not ideal, they know it's not ideal, but they are trying to solve it as quickly as they can.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-Hillsborough Park.

C. Simpson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Department of Social Development and Seniors' annual report describes the poverty elimination strategy as still being developed, requiring input from residents and community organizations. The minister has said that there would be something announced soon. To date, there's been no mention of what will happen to help move Islanders living in poverty out of poverty.

Poverty elimination strategy

Question to the Minister of Social Development and Seniors: Can you tell this House today what the deadline is for finalizing this strategy, the measures that will be used, and how Islanders will know if it's working?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Social Development and Seniors.

Hon. B. Ramsay: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

That review is not – the strategy is not complete yet. Hopefully in the next two or three weeks we should have that out.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-Hillsborough Park.

C. Simpson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The *Poverty Elimination Strategy Act* sets targets, but targets mean virtually nothing without a funded action plan behind them. The Province claims to be tracking five key poverty indicators: poverty rate for all people, poverty rate for children under the age of 18, food insecurity for all people, food insecurity for children under 18, and chronic homelessness.

Question to the same minister: Minister, can you table for this House the specific programs, dollars, and timelines associated with these five poverty indicators?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Social Development and Seniors.

Hon. B. Ramsay: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I can certainly go to the department and see if I can get that.

Thank you.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-Hillsborough Park.

C. Simpson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Canada disability benefit provides up to \$200 a month to individuals living with disabilities. Advocates on PEI have been clear that this does not cover basic needs. One advocate told CBC that a single medication that cost a dollar a day before COVID now costs \$2.50, and that may be one of seven or eight medications that this person is taking.

Question to the Minister of Social Development and Seniors: What is the Province doing to complement that benefit so that people with disabilities are not still living in poverty while receiving both federal and provincial supports?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Social Development and Seniors.

Hon. B. Ramsay: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

One of the things we did do with the federal program was to ensure that the money that came in – that folks did not have to claim that on their taxes so that they would lose money on

accessibility programs or seniors independence programs. So, we worked with the federal government to ensure that didn't affect that.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-Hillsborough Park.

C. Simpson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

People with disabilities are disproportionately likely to live in poverty. With the federal benefit now in place but acknowledged as insufficient, and with our own poverty elimination strategy still under development, many Islanders are at a loss.

Question to the Minister of Social Development and Seniors: Is there any coordinated plan currently specifically targeting poverty among Islanders with disabilities? If so, what is it?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Social Development and Seniors.

Hon. B. Ramsay: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

We do have the targeted basic income guarantee for 635 of our clients, and we are reviewing that right now. If more people have to come on board, then that's what we'll do.

Thank you.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-Hillsborough Park.

C. Simpson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

During the Minister of Social Development and Seniors Social Work Month statement, she stated that the government is investing in hiring child protection youth and family service workers. It would be good to know how this hiring is actually going.

Social worker recruitment

Question to the same minister: Minister, how many positions were filled last year, how many are currently vacant, and what is the recruitment target for this upcoming year?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Social Development and Seniors.

Hon. B. Ramsay: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I'd have to get those numbers and take them back.

Thank you.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-Hillsborough Park.

C. Simpson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[1:45 p.m.]

Recruiting social workers is a challenge; keeping them is another. Social work has become one of the highest rates of burnout and turnover among professionals.

Question to the Minister of Social Development and Seniors: Beyond hiring, what specific retention measures has your department implemented? What is the average length of service for a child protection social worker on PEI?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Social Development and Seniors.

Hon. B. Ramsay: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I think I should recognize the social workers right now through that question. They're a wonderful group of people who work in very, very difficult situations. I can imagine the burnout rate is pretty short. I can imagine that but being a youth worker myself, I stayed in that field for 20 years working with young people in crisis.

Our retention is – I can't exactly give you the exact number on that, but I can get it for you.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Third Party.

M. MacFarlane: When this government, under a different Premier, was re-elected back in 2023, Islanders were told that patient medical homes would be the solution to the patient registry, that every Islander would be associated with a medical home, and therefore, off the patient registry by the spring of 2025. Unfortunately, over a year later as we enter the summer of 2026, the patient registry has remained largely unchanged.

Patient registry (further)

Question to the Minister of Health: Patient medical homes have had great success attaching people to primary care in other provinces. Why has this government failed to deliver the same results here for Islanders?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Hon. C. Deagle: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

It is certainly a good question. I think, as the member has mentioned, that other provinces have had great success in attaching patients to patient medical homes in other provinces. I think we are seeing some success, not at the rate that we would obviously like. I think our new hire in medical affairs, Dr. Workentin, is going to be a huge benefit in speeding up that process coming from a province where he's affiliated hundreds of thousands of patients to patient medical homes.

The reality is we can put up all these patient medical homes, we obviously have to staff them, family physicians being obviously one of hardest positions to recruit for. But I do have confidence that I think they'll start seeing some more significant progress in the coming months.

Thank you.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Third Party, first supplementary.

M. MacFarlane: I've spoken to one group in Hunter River who has been working for years trying to expand the patient medical home in that community. I worked with some of these individuals who brought the medical home to Crapaud with great success. They are well aware of the benefits of these medical homes in rural communities but they're also well aware of how hard it was to bring this government and the previous Liberal along to help in that process.

Question to the same minister: This group in Hunter River has been trying for almost three years now to expand Islanders' access to primary care and to actually connect Islanders with doctors. Why are they being blocked at every turn, minister?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Hon. C. Deagle: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

They are certainly not being blocked. I'm hoping to make an announcement next month. I guess next week is June. Next month, there is \$1.5 million in the capital budget to expand the Hunter River medical home, which we will be doing.

Thank you.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Third Party, second supplementary.

M. MacFarlane: That's great to hear the minister is going to support that initiative in Hunter River.

At some point, Islanders just need a government who is going to lead, one who isn't terrified to make a decision. Islanders are struggling not just with access to health care, but with affordability, with housing, and much more. This Premier and his ministers seem completely unable to make a decision that's actually going to help Islanders.

Question again to the Minister of Health: Minister, Islanders are sick of reviews, delays, and excuses. Will you commit to either getting out of the way or actually supporting communities to lead their medical homes over the finish line to get Islanders off the patient registry?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Hon. C. Deagle: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and 100 percent, I want to be out of the way, let the experts do what they can and set these patient medical homes up and affiliate patients off the patient registry.

I actually, I do agree with the hon. member that the patient medical homes are the way to go.

[1:50 p.m.]

It's very difficult to change the culture within the system, though, of how those patient medical homes operate. The idea being that you are assigned to a patient medical home in a certain geographic area, not necessarily to a family doctor, is what everyone is very used to, including family doctors. It takes a long time to change that culture and to bring everyone along with it, but I can assure you the medical affairs team at Health PEI is working to do just that. As I mentioned, with our new hire there who will

kind of champion that cause, I think we're going to start seeing progress.

Thank you.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-Victoria Park.

K. Bernard: Thank you.

Progress for government in the area of violence in schools has been stagnant, and school personnel are left on their own daily to deal with it. Due to the complex needs of students, many EAs and/or teachers work one-on-one with students in small rooms where they feel there's no way that they could do their job safely without their personal cell phone, but this should not be the case. One simple solution put forward was for EAs to carry walkie-talkies, like they used to in the past, or have some sort of panic button.

Support for educational assistants (further)

Question to the Minister of Education: Will you commit to equipping EAs with some sort of device that they keep on their person that only takes a simple press of a button to alert someone that they are in need of immediate assistance?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Education and Early Years.

Hon. R. Croucher: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I'm committed to exploring any and all options that will make our staff safer in our Island schools. We are embarking upon an EA review, and if that's one of the recommendations, we'll certainly look at it.

Thank you.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-Victoria Park, first supplementary.

K. Bernard: Thank you.

I wish that government felt the urgency for this.

Another issue being faced by teachers and EAs is a lack of training for EAs. It used to be that every EA had the human resources program where they learned hands-on things like non-violent crisis intervention and the importance of setting boundaries and being consistent. Now

there's a shorter, more condensed version of the program available.

Question to the same minister. Educational assistants have complex jobs and they need specific training. What are you doing to ensure EAs have the competencies and skills they need to meet the current demands in schools?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Education and Early Years.

Hon. R. Croucher: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I want to take this opportunity to thank all of our hardworking, dedicated, and professional EAs that we have in the system, and we've got some great ones. They've got one of the toughest jobs in our system; there's no question about that. That is exactly why we're going to spend the time reviewing the role of an EA and how we make their job easier, more effective, and strengthen that very, very important role in our system.

Thank you.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-Victoria Park, second supplementary.

K. Bernard: Thank you.

I would like to remind the minister that two years later, we're still waiting for the action plan for the inclusion model review. So, I don't have much faith in your reviews.

EAs play a vital role in our Island schools, yet many are having to work three jobs just to make ends meet. Full time is considered 30 hours, and they do not get paid near enough. Once someone is an EA, there's no opportunity to move up the ladder, so to speak. This is a career to be very proud of, but this government isn't investing in it the way they should be.

Question to the same minister: Will you commit to creating a salaried pay grid for EAs, similar to early childhood educators?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Education and Early Years.

Hon. R. Croucher: That would certainly be something that would be talked about and identified, I believe, in collective bargaining. Again, our EAs – very, very important to our

system and I want to thank each and every one of them today.

Thank you.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Georgetown-Pownal.

B. Curran: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, for many people in my district, Seafood 2000 is a key employer, and in fact, across Kings County, it is the livelihood for a lot of people. Financial difficulties have this processor short on funds right at the start of the spring season. The threat to local jobs and fishers' livelihoods/payroll was immediate. I know the minister understands that protecting our fishers and our workers is a top priority, so Finance PEI stepped in with DIP funding to bridge the gap and keep operations in Georgetown going.

Support for employees of Seafood 2000

A question to the Minister of Economic Development, Innovation and Trade: Can the minister outline how provincial funding will provide peace of mind to the employees and fishers who rely on the facility for their livelihood?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Economic Development, Trade and Artificial Intelligence.

Hon. J. Redmond: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the hon. member for the question.

Certainly, the Province has provided immediate financial assistance through a loan – it was worked through the court systems and such – to ensure that those lobster fishermen and the employees that work there do get paid for the season.

Thank you.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Georgetown-Pownal.

B. Curran: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

We are talking about a vital source of employment and economic development in Kings County, supporting a dedicated workforce that includes many essential plant workers and fishers. When things tighten up, it's the families

who depend on those weekly paycheques who feel the stress first. Government's financial bridge was put in place specifically to ensure that workers and fishers aren't left facing the brunt of these financial challenges.

[1:55 p.m.]

A question to the same minister: How is the department working to ensure that operations continue smoothly and that plant workers and fishers remain fully employed and cheques keep coming throughout this spring season?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Economic Development, Trade and Artificial Intelligence.

Hon. J. Redmond: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the hon. member for the question.

Certainly, that is the goal of the loan for Seafood 2000, to ensure that they are paying the lobster fishers for their catches and the employees that are working so hard within the facility. Certainly, we know how important fisheries is to the province, and we are committed to helping where we can.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Georgetown-Pownal, second supplementary.

B. Curran: Mr. Speaker, standing up for rural PEI means making sure our workforce has the stability when commercial pressures arise. Government is focused on putting a protective wall around Island jobs and ensuring our community's workforce is supported during this period of transition.

Question to the same minister: Can the minister confirm that government will continue to prioritize the financial security of these workers and fishers, and ensuring that all necessary approvals are moved forward so that no employee or fisher misses a paycheque while the company restructures?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Economic Development, Trade and Artificial Intelligence.

Hon. J. Redmond: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Certainly, what we've done with Seafood 2000 is to ensure that the employees and the fishers do get paid to the end of the season, as we know how important that is. We want to ensure that

they do, and they know that it's a secure place currently to fish in and process.

Thank you.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Tyne Valley-Sherbrooke.

H. MacLennan: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Islanders expect that when seniors move into community care facilities, they are treated with dignity, safety, and fairness. We continue to hear a few concerns about rising rents and whether the level of care being provided truly matches what residents are paying. Seniors living on fixed incomes need to know that there is transparency and a fair process governing the cost of their housing and care services.

Long-term care (further)

Question to the Minister of Health and Wellness: Can the minister explain how rent increases in community care facilities are currently regulated, and what protections are in place to ensure that seniors and government are not facing unjustified or excessive cost increases?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Social Development and Seniors.

Hon. B. Ramsay: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, I'll take this question – and first I'd like to thank the 36 community care facilities across Prince Edward Island for the work that they do in caring for not just seniors, but individuals who have to make community care their home.

Our department, the Department of Social Development and Seniors, subsidizes 657 clients of the 1,187 total beds. So, we do negotiate that cost through our department, but just of the 657 beds, so community care facilities remain private, and they set their rates for self-pay residents. That's where it is right now.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Tyne Valley-Sherbrooke, first supplementary.

H. MacLennan: Mr. Speaker, there's a range in what private facilities across the province charge for residency. Islanders deserve to know that if they are being charged the premium price, they are receiving a premium standard of care.

A question to either the Minister of Health or the Minister of Social Development and Seniors:

Will the minister consider today to introducing regulatory changes that directly link the fees private community care facilities are permitted to charge with the actual quality and the level of care the residents receive?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Hon. C. Deagle: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Yeah, some of this does fall within the Department of Seniors, and some of it falls within the Department of Health. More so on our side would be the inspections and regulation of these facilities. We would conduct regular inspections, usually without any notice. The inspectors would show up and inspect facilities.

I guess what I would say on the standard of care is that facilities can risk losing their licence or facing other conditions on their facilities if those standards aren't met. I do want to be careful here because I think our community care homes across PEI do offer an excellent service, and many, many people are very pleased with the care that they do receive and the staff and the owners and the pride they take in their work. But yes, we perform the inspections and there is significant – you know, they can face losing their licence if they don't meet those standards.

Thank you.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Tyne Valley-Sherbrooke, second supplementary.

H. MacLennan: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[2:00 p.m.]

I do agree with the minister, they do a great job, the community care, but I've heard some discrepancies, so I'm just bringing this up.

The biggest worry for any family is how a home reacts when a senior gets hurt, especially after a fall. Families need to be 100 percent sure that there was real oversight and that the rules for medical follow-up aren't just words on a page, they are actually happening every single time a senior is at risk.

Question to either minister: Can the minister outline the protocols that facilities must follow when a senior experiences a fall and how the department monitors and enforces proper

treatment, reporting, and follow-up care to ensure residents are protected?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Hon. C. Deagle: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I don't know what the exact protocol is when that situation happens, but as I mentioned in my previous answer, we conduct all the inspections and set the regulations.

But I would think that if there was an issue such as the member is speaking about, perhaps he can bring it to our department's attention. I would say that those inspectors could probably follow up with that particular facility to ensure that the proper protocols and practices are being followed.

Thank you.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Hon. H. Perry: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

Let's follow with this community care line, and let's see how well that you go to the department and come back with information.

The past few weeks, I've asked a couple of questions regarding community care facilities, but in particular the one in Tignish, of course. One of the issues was regarding – and I brought it up again at end of last week – 30 of the 51 residents do not have a family doctor, therefore they do not have access to medication refills other than going through the ER and waiting there all day to do it.

Nursing care for level 4 residents (further)

I asked that question, and the minister said he was going to go to his department and come back. Can you give us an update on what the response is to my inquiry?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Hon. C. Deagle: Mr. Speaker, I don't have an answer for that yet.

Thank you.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Hon. H. Perry: Mr. Speaker, this has been at least probably three weeks since I've been asking about this concern, and it's a serious concern. When you have senior citizens who may have complex medical needs but also have a requirement to have their medications refilled, where the doctor that was formerly in Tignish and came back on locum had them up until recently when Health PEI said no, no longer we're doing that.

These 30 residents are left on their own without any possible way to get a prescription refill. And you can't say Maple, because they do not access computers/cell phones and that, and they all need individual email addresses. So, they cannot do it, and there is not a staff person available to do that for them.

Will you go back and will you please reach out to the community care facility in Tignish and let them know what you are going to do to help them out in that situation, along with – and this is another question There are four patients that are presented there of the 51 who require a level 4 care, which is 24-hour nursing care. Community care facilities staff are not trained for that. They require more care. We talked about falls. We talked about a safe environment. You were going to come back with more information. What is that information?

Speaker: Alright, member. I think there are multiple questions there, so I'll let you pick which one you want to answer there.

The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Hon. C. Deagle: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I was hoping he would keep talking longer. I'm trying to get an answer back from the department on his first part of the question.

No, but on the first part of that question, I did just message the department there to find out on the prescription side and what the exact answer is to that. I know I did talk to them briefly about it. I can't recall exactly what they had told me, but I just want to be accurate in the information I do provide on that so I'll just hold off on trying to answer that specifically.

On the second part of his question there, he mentioned about the level 4 patients in community care. What I did say last week is that I'd be open to meeting with the Community Care Association of PEI because I think we have

to work out a formal framework of how this would work because right now, they have to bring in staff that are able to care for those patients and that's obviously at a higher cost to them. So, I think we have to work out what a formal agreement would look like with the Community Care Association to help address these particular situations.

Thank you.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Hon. H. Perry: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

What they need, though – they need an answer now. You can't work it out. It's a community care facility; they go up to level 3s. Level 4s are manor patients, so they need to address that issue of opening more beds.

[2:05 p.m.]

But I'm going to move on to one more thing. I'm going to keep it local. Tignish Co-operative Health Centre has been in existence as a cooperative since 1974. That's 52 years, and they've offered services over those years. They have a pharmacy, a medical health services, foot care, physio, massage therapy, dental public health, Life Cycle Nutrition, a hearing clinic, a primary care clinic, a daycare, hospice – among others.

Why is this government not having the Tignish Co-operative Health Care Centre as a patient medical home when you're trying to reach 30?

Tignish Co-operative Health Centre

Here's an easy one: Why is Tignish not a patient medical home when it was the first collaborative health care centre on Prince Edward Island?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Hon. C. Deagle: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I think the department provides a grant to this particular facility – I think a \$100,000 grant – which, to be honest, the department wanted to roll back. I said no, that's not happening; they provide an important service in Tignish. I said that \$100,000 has to stay in the budget.

I am standing up for rural PEI. I know the great services that they do offer. It's the only facility in PEI that we offer this grant to, I think, but I do think it's important. I think that we do need it because –

[Interjection]

Hon. C. Deagle: Yes, it is, and I think the hon. member makes a good point. I can look into why this wouldn't be considered a patient medical home and if it can be. Perhaps it has to do with staffing. I'm not sure, but I can enquire with Health PEI about that.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-West Royalty, final question.

G. McNeilly: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

Some concerning numbers through the HIFIS system – the most recent report stated that the homeless veterans in Prince Edward Island is up 40 percent. This number is very striking and it's reported on.

Provincial response to homelessness (further)

Minister of Housing: What are you doing to support our homeless veterans, and will you reach out the Veterans Affairs, who are close by, and figure out why we have a 40 percent increase in our homeless veterans in Prince Edward Island?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Housing and Communities.

Hon. K. Dollar: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The 40 percent – I'm not sure how many actual individuals are in that 40 percent, but absolutely, it is concerning. Sure, I will, yes.

Thanks.

Statements by Ministers

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Finance and Affordability.

PEILCC/Kari Rideshare Pilot Program

Hon. J. Burridge: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I'm pleased to rise today to announce an initiative that will make a real difference in rural

PEI. This summer, PEI Liquor Control Commission is partnering with Kari to launch the rural rideshare pilot program, an important step toward improving local access to transportation in communities with limited options.

I grew up in rural PEI, and I know firsthand, for many rural residents, getting home safely after visiting friends or attending a community event can be a real challenge. So, beginning this June and rolling out across select rural regions over the summer, this program will help close the gap by providing on-demand rideshare services in rural areas, from local drivers, where no commercial taxi currently exists.

Service will begin operating out of regional base locations such as North Rustico, Richmond, Souris, O'Leary, and Tignish throughout June, followed by Morell, Eldon, Crapaud, and Kensington shortly thereafter.

Kari is locally owned company that offers an app-based service, letting users request and pay for riders from nearby independent drivers. Those local drivers will be available on demand during key evening and weekend hours, offering safe, reliable, and convenient transportation. And if anyone is interested in providing this service, they can learn more on the Kari website.

The benefits are clear. This program will support responsible choices by residents that will no longer have to wait for a driver to come from Charlottetown to pick them up, and by visitors who are used to having transportation options at their fingertips. It will also strengthen our rural communities by making it easier for people to participate in local events, support businesses, and stay connected.

This initiative reflects our commitment to social responsibility, community safety, affordability, and to providing those practical solutions that meet people where they are.

Rural communities and businesses are at the heart of Prince Edward Island, and we are ensuring that they have safe, local, easy-to-access transportation services to support them.

Thank you.

Speaker: Responding to the minister's statement – you have about two minutes and ten seconds – the hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Hon. H. Perry: Thank you very much.

I don't need that long to say thank you for making my weekends a little bit lighter.

[Hear, hear!]

[2:10 p.m.]

Hon. H. Perry: I know as well as anybody in here representing a rural area the need for a taxi service or a drive home at any time – whether it's to a medical appointment, whether it's to an event, whether it's home from an event, or what have you. It's very, very important that we have access to that. It makes our roads a heck of a lot safer, and it does relieve a lot of the pressure on those individuals who are going out to know that they will have that safe drive to and from – whether it's a dance at the French school in DeBlois, or what have you. Weddings.

I know the need for this, and I do appreciate that Tignish is one of the communities that will be able to access Kari. I appreciate this. I look forward to finding out more information on it. If you need a list of names of potential people, I can give those driver names to you.

With that, I hope everyone takes advantage of it.

Thank you.

Speaker: Responding to the minister's statement, about a minute and five seconds max, the hon. Member from New Haven-Rocky Point.

P. Bevan-Baker: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

I don't often get excited about work this government does, but I'm telling you, this is perhaps – seriously – the most exciting thing I've heard from this government all sitting. It's a wonderful initiative.

If you live in rural Prince Edward Island, until what you've just described, you really had no choice but to own a car to get you around – whether that was for medical appointments, to go and visit your friends, to go and do some recreation somewhere, to go into town to shop – and that's a heavy burden, financially, on rural Islanders. It creates heavy carbon footprints every time you go in and out of town or wherever you're going.

So, to have the opportunity for a ride share program across the province – I understand it will be phased in over time, and I really like the idea of this being a collaborative piece of work with the Liquor Commission. I don't know quite what the financial support coming from government will be, but I'm really excited about this.

I really thank the minister sincerely for this program. It's long overdue, and it will be an enormous boon to so, so many rural Islanders.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Presenting and Receiving Petitions

Tabling of Documents

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Transportation, Infrastructure and Energy.

Hon. E. Hudson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

By leave of the House, I beg leave to table a response to a petition that was tabled or brought forward here in the Legislature by the Member from Kensington-Malpeque, and I move, seconded by the hon. Minister of Finance and Affordability, that the said response do now be received and do lie on the Table.

Speaker: Shall it carry? Carried.

Reports by Committees

Introduction of Government Bills

Orders of the Day (Government)

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Justice, Public Safety and Attorney General.

Hon. B. Thompson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I move, seconded by the hon. Minister of Finance and Affordability, that the 1st order of the day be now read.

Speaker: Shall it carry? Carried.

Clerk: Order No. 1, Consideration of the Estimates, in committee.

Speaker: Minister.

Hon. B. Thompson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I move, seconded by the hon. Minister of Finance and Affordability, that this House do now resolve itself into a Committee of the Whole House to take into consideration the grant of supply to His Majesty.

Speaker: Shall it carry? Carried.

The Member from Charlottetown-Belvedere to chair Committee of the Whole.

[S. Dillon in the chair]

Chair: The House is now in a Committee of the Whole House to take into consideration the grant of supply to His Majesty.

Minister, do you have a stranger you'd like to bring onto the floor?

Hon. R. Croucher: I do.

Chair: Shall it be granted? Granted.

[2:15 p.m.]

Can you please state your name and your title for Hansard?

Chris DesRoche: Chris DesRoche, director of finance and administration for the Department of Education and Early Years.

Chair: For those following along, we are on page 45, under English Education, Programs, and Services.

It has been read, so it is open for questions.

The hon. Member from Charlottetown-Hillsborough Park.

C. Simpson: Thank you, Chair. Welcome back, Chris.

Before I get started, I'm wondering if you can answer a general question. Chris, when taking a look at preparation for this operational budget and recognizing that there needed to be some austerity measures, what number were you asked to find in total within the department?

Chris DesRoche: The department proper – so, excluding La Commission scolaire de langue française and excluding Public Schools Branch – received a \$16.4 million increase.

C. Simpson: I'm sorry?

Chris DesRoche: A \$16.4 million increase for the Department of Education and Early Years.

C. Simpson: Chris, what were you asked to find to return back?

Chris DesRoche: Well, that's –

C. Simpson: We've been asked to ask questions to find out the details.

Chair: Does this question fall under this section?

Chris DesRoche: Just overall, I guess.

An Hon. Member: They can ask in Question Period.

C. Simpson: I did.

Chair: Is it specific to this section?

C. Simpson: Alright, I'll reframe the question. I'll ask you each question, Chris, in each section.

How much was English education, programs, and services asked to return?

Chris DesRoche: It's more the opposite. It's a budget target per section. For the entire department, like I said, the budget target was a \$16.4 million increase, excluding the school boards.

C. Simpson: So, there's a \$16.4 million increase. That means there was zero net cuts to English education, programs, and services? It looks exactly the same; in fact, there's growth?

Chris DesRoche: No, I wouldn't say there's no reductions. The materials, supplies, and services line is down \$25,000. That would be the only line that's down. Salaries is up \$375,000, for a net increase of \$351,000.

C. Simpson: The salary increases – we've been hearing about increases due to negotiations, which makes sense. There are 25 full-time-equivalent positions. In those 25 full-time-equivalent positions, are there any changes to the structure? In other words, have any of the leads or staff been eliminated and others brought in?

Chris DesRoche: There was actually a net increase of two positions in this department.

C. Simpson: I'm sorry?

Chris DesRoche: There was a net increase of two positions in this department. There's the bilingual inclusive education manager, and there's an education leader that's going to focus on cyberbullying and things like that.

C. Simpson: Are there any vacant positions or any curriculum leads that have been lost?

Chris DesRoche: No, there's no lost. Sometimes they change the roles of those positions depending on the projects of the year.

C. Simpson: Has the social studies lead and civic education been moved? Is that gone?

Chris DesRoche: No, they're doing hiring right now. The social studies service has not been changed. It will continue to be in the department. Whether it's assigned by itself or with another position – that's to be determined.

C. Simpson: Does that mean that that role might be an added role under another lead? Is that what you mean there?

Chris DesRoche: It certainly could be. This is the time of year when they're looking at what the roles are needed for the coming year.

Chair: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-Victoria Park.

K. Bernard: Thank you, Chair. Welcome back, Chris.

[2:20 p.m.]

I'm looking at the grants and there doesn't seem to be an increase in the grants. With the rising cost of everything, are you confident that those grants will be sufficient?

Chris DesRoche: There is \$285,000 of grants – \$214,000 is a grant to the Literacy Alliance for operational funding and some summer tutoring. That's the first year of a three-year agreement.

K. Bernard: In this budget, are there any innovative changes that government will be announcing or that government is working on right now?

Chris DesRoche: I think the bilingual inclusive education manager is going to be leading some reviews and some work that could certainly have some innovative changes to the system.

K. Bernard: I've heard from a few schools who fear that their EA complements are going to be down, despite the fact they've got rising complex needs coming in. Will schools be guaranteed to keep the EAs that they have? I know that government keeps saying they've invested in EAs, but yet, hearing concerns from administrators that they're down potentially. Is that something we can expect to see?

Chris DesRoche: The EAs are in the Public Schools Branch section to come, but as an overall, they're up. Somebody's down, but somebody's up.

K. Bernard: Is this where we could talk about the inclusive education review report? Is it under this section?

Chris DesRoche: It is in this section, yeah.

K. Bernard: That report – the action plan was supposed to be released in fall of 2024, which is almost two years ago. What will we see in this budget to support the inclusive education report action plan? I'm assuming it's done and it hasn't been released. Two years is....

Chris DesRoche: There are two positions in this division, the inclusive education manager and the inclusive education policy analyst, which existed prior to help with that work. They'll be the ones leading the charge on educational assistants review. We also have the alternate education review, and I'm sure there's lots of other work that they'll be leading.

K. Bernard: Is the alternate education review like alternative education settings? Okay.

Is there anything in this budget for September that is a project as a result of the inclusion review action plan?

Chris DesRoche: We did increase the special needs grant in the early years division as a result of some of that work. Certainly, the positions noted were a part of that plan and the review. So, I would say not yet, until that work is completed.

Chair: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-Hillsborough Park.

C. Simpson: Thank you, Chair.

Chris, I'm not sure if this question belongs here or in leadership and learning. In servicing and professional development, is there curriculum development and in-servicing that's slated for this coming year? Which area would that be under? I could be in the wrong section.

Chris DesRoche: That would be in the next section.

C. Simpson: It is in the next section? I'm good for right now.

Chair: The hon. Leader of the Third Party.

M. MacFarlane: Thank you, Chair.

Is this the section – or what section would it be if not this one – that we might ask questions on funding for homeschooling?

Chris DesRoche: Well, I guess it could be this section, except there is no funding besides – we do lend materials and they return them.

M. MacFarlane: There must be some budget amount for materials to make homeschooling available for families – or, Chris, is there no funding for it?

Chris DesRoche: Not through our department, besides that we do lend the materials. They pay a deposit, and when they return the materials, we provide the deposit back.

M. MacFarlane: Okay. Is there a section within the department that sort of oversees homeschooling – whether it's working, whether it needs supports, whether it's expanding? I'm hearing that there are more and more families, year over year, that are deciding to homeschool their children for whatever reason.

[2:25 p.m.]

Chris DesRoche: It would be in this section. I think, certainly during COVID, we saw an increase during those couple of years. I think it's back to a normal level, but we could bring back those numbers for you.

M. MacFarlane: Thank you. I'd appreciate it if you could do that. I guess I don't have any other questions given the answers to the previous ones on it, Chris, but I'd appreciate some information on it.

Chris DesRoche: I do have, actually, noted here, a takeback for you from last session. IRAC has 28 FTEs including three commissioners with a salary range of about \$3.5 million.

M. MacFarlane: Okay. Thank you for that.

Chair: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-Hillsborough Park.

C. Simpson: I just want to make sure before we move on, Chris – English education, programs, and services is not curriculum development in this writing, right? That's not what happens in here anymore. That's in leadership, right?

Chris DesRoche: No, this is the curriculum writing section.

C. Simpson: Okay. Where is the focus in curriculum development in the division this year?

Chris DesRoche: In the coming year, we have some K-3 English language arts, some grade 4 integrated units that will be updated, Math 801, some high school preparatory course for grade 10 academic math, 7-9 career and technical education.... There's a long list.

C. Simpson: Okay, I'll go another way. Is there any work afoot to take a look at the kindergarten curriculum and moving it back to a play-based approach to curriculum delivery?

Chris DesRoche: I believe so, but I think it would be better if I took that back and provided a better answer than I can provide.

C. Simpson: Okay, thank you.

This could be a question under the Public Schools Branch and the French language school board, but I'll ask it here just in case I miss it. The kindergarten ratio is 1:15, lands at 1:18 – it's not in stone. Are we still working toward that level of instructional staff for kindergarten, or is that a PSB question?

Chris DesRoche: It would be PSB, but those numbers are still accurate.

C. Simpson: Okay. I'm good, thank you.

Thanks, Chris.

Chair: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-Victoria Park.

K. Bernard: Thank you, Chair.

I think I just have two questions left on this section. When talking about curriculum development, I'm wondering if there's any funding in this budget – perhaps it was complete or not – on the sexual health curriculum. Is there anything being done on that in this budget?

Chris DesRoche: The sexual health curricula was updated in grades 7-9 in 2023 in the English programs and 2025 in French programs.

K. Bernard: Okay. So, no plans for the K-6 from this budget?

Chris DesRoche: I would have to take that back. I'm not sure.

K. Bernard: I'm wondering about – I know we passed the financial literacy bill, and I know that's something that has been kind of ongoing, but is there anything set aside specifically in this budget for financial literacy?

Chris DesRoche: Well, the financial literacy is kind of peppered throughout a number of different areas. There are dedicated financial literacy units in grade 7-9 exploratory modules. The grade 10 CEO course has a component to it. Grade 11 Math 521K, Math 801A and 801M. Grade 12 Math 621A. It's kind of mingled throughout.

K. Bernard: I'm good. Thank you.

Chair: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-Hillsborough Park.

C. Simpson: Thank you, Chair.

Chris, can you leave with us or bring back a list of the curriculum development and in-servicing that is happening or planned for in the next year? You said it was a long list; that's okay, I appreciate that. If you could just –

Chris DesRoche: No, that was the curriculum renewal. In the next section, we can go through some of the planned professional development.

C. Simpson: Okay, so if you don't mind leaving a list for us to – that would be great.

Chris DesRoche: Yeah, we can do that. I can just table kind of what the plans are. It's primarily focused on social-emotional learning and those kinds of things.

C. Simpson: That would be wonderful.

Okay, thank you.

Chair: Chris, I just have a question. I think everybody else has asked.

I just want to clarify: Did you say there were two people being hired to do a review on the inclusive ed?

[2:30 p.m.]

Chris DesRoche: There is a policy analyst that already exists today, and there is a bilingual inclusive education manager that will service the English and French school boards and divisions. It has already been approved to be posted. If it's not posted now, it will be posted soon.

Chair: Okay. Is this a teacher, or is this somebody that can be a person other than a teacher?

Chris DesRoche: I'm not 100 percent sure on the qualifications. I would anticipate it has an education degree, but I'm not certain on that.

Chair: Okay, thank you.

The hon. Member from Tyne Valley-Sherbrooke.

H. MacLennan: Just one question on the proposal for the K-12. Is that going to be an in-house thing, or is there any money put aside?

Hon. R. Croucher: The proposal for the...?

H. MacLennan: The K-12 – for financial literacy, sorry.

Hon. R. Croucher: There's no proposal in front of us currently, is there?

H. MacLennan: Okay. I was going by the letter that you had that they were working.... I was just wondering whether it was going to be done in-house.

Chris DesRoche: We could probably bring some information back regarding that.

Hon. R. Croucher: I don't recall, member.

H. MacLennan: Okay.

Chair: Shall the section carry? Carried.

Leadership and Learning

“Appropriations provided for instructional development and leadership training.”
Administration: 10,200. Equipment: 15,000.
Materials, Supplies, and Services: 429,000.
Professional Services: 25,000. Salaries:
2,701,200. Travel and Training: 63,300. Grants:
119,000.

Total Leadership and Learning: 3,362,700

The hon. Member from Charlottetown-Victoria Park.

K. Bernard: Thank you, Chair.

I know that you had mentioned the EA review, but I'm curious if – I know the Member from Charlottetown-Belvedere has talked about this a lot – and I floated the idea by a few EAs that I've met with recently – about having a coach, like a mentor, within the school system for EAs. If that's something that comes out of the review, I think that is a phenomenal idea, and so do the EAs working in the system.

Is that something that government will find funding for? Do you have wiggle room there for that sort of thing?

Chris DesRoche: Well, I have heard that idea being proposed as part of the review, so that's good news. Whether we have funding for it this year kind of depends on what the recommendation is, what it looks like, how much it costs for the coaches – but I have heard that idea mentioned.

K. Bernard: I know this isn't a budget question, but I'm wondering if – well, kind of, it is: Do you have any sense of how long that review might take?

Chris DesRoche: No, I'm not sure. We don't have the person hired yet that would lead it. It might be posted now, though. If not, soon.

K. Bernard: I hope.

I know that obviously there's lots of extra supports needed every year, so do we have any sense – are we going to be able to have a full-time counsellor in every school this coming September? I might as well ask.

Chris DesRoche: That would be in the Public Schools Branch section, but I don't believe

that's how they allocate them out in the current year, and I'm not aware of any changes in the coming year to the way they allocate them.

K. Bernard: Okay. Well, I don't like the way they're allocated. I think there should be at least one in every school.

What new development and training will be funded in the next year for staff?

Chris DesRoche: During the upcoming year, there will be some delivery of components of PRISM, systemwide cultural competency training to administrators and teachers. There will be teachers and administrators with professional learning on the integration of social-emotional learning with some work tied to Dr. David Canter.

[2:35 p.m.]

There is a review of the format and usage of the academic learning plans. Certainly, Foundations has been a good program that's replaced Reading Recovery; they have seen, anecdotally, some gains. We'll see when the upcoming assessments occur.

There are some revised K-2 English language arts foundational learnings as well.

K. Bernard: Is this the section where we would talk about PBIS?

Chris DesRoche: PBIS is housed in the Public Schools Branch section.

K. Bernard: Okay. Under grants, there's the Teachers' Federation in-service projects, and the funding is \$70,000. Can you tell us what those in-service projects are?

Chris DesRoche: I can. There are two articles in the collective agreement that require us to pay those amounts. One is a professional development assistance program for \$50,000, and the other is a \$20,000 memorandum of understanding – professional fund for administrators, \$20,000 which is used by principals and vice principals for professional development.

Chair: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-Hillsborough Park.

C. Simpson: Thank you, Chair.

Chris, when you look at the salaries, we're down a bit. Given the collective agreements, wages would be up. My question would be: How many staff are we down? This reads as though we must down staff in this section.

Chris DesRoche: Yes, we are looking for efficiencies between the English programs and services section and the leadership and learning section. There is no fixed number at this point of how many positions it could be. It could also be a reduction of casual wages, so the substitute costs. If they look at alternate ways of providing PD, perhaps the substitute costs to pull people out will be reduced. But as a management team, we certainly are looking for efficiencies given the financial climate.

C. Simpson: Are you able to share with us what the efficiency amount for this section was that you were looking for?

Chris DesRoche: Well, I housed it in this section, but between the two sections, we're hoping to find about \$180,000.

C. Simpson: Thank you for that, Chris.

When you look to materials and supplies – you talked about some of the efficiencies around how subs and such are handled, but that leads me to believe that maybe there's some work that's not happening, with the reduction that might have been there. What's different? Why is that materials, supplies, and services down?

Chris DesRoche: Well, certainly as a department, the top three lines – administration, equipment, and materials, supplies, and services – in every section, we challenged the directors to review their '25-26 expenditures and try to find as much efficiency as we can to preserve other areas like wages, grants, and what have you.

C. Simpson: That makes sense. Does this mean, though, Chris, that there might be training or sessions that might have been slated to happen that now can't happen because of this?

Chris DesRoche: No, I don't think so. The director indicated she can work within the existing budget and perform all the necessary PD and curriculum development that's needed.

C. Simpson: I appreciate the \$180,000, roughly, for – looking to find within the two units. Is that a consistent number across all of the units of the department?

Chris DesRoche: I wouldn't say it's a consistent amount. We are hoping to save approximately 4 or 5 percent across the board, but whether we can or not depends on our reviews as a department management team.

C. Simpson: When you give the list of curriculum development, can you provide us with a list, too, of the intended professional development or in-servicing that could be happening, or do they go hand in hand?

Chris DesRoche: We can bring back a list of curriculum development and the in-service professional development that's planned.

C. Simpson: And you're going to bring back – I'm pretty sure I wrote this down, but just in case – taking a look at the play-based approach to curriculum development?

Okay, I'm good.

Chris DesRoche: The director is listening and...

C. Simpson: I know, they'll be right on that.

Chris DesRoche: ...she's likely working on it already.

[2:40 p.m.]

C. Simpson: I would agree. Thank you.

Chair: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-Victoria Park.

K. Bernard: Thank you, Chair.

Under the grants, \$49,000 for school goals, training and school resources – can you tell us a bit about that?

Chris DesRoche: Sure. Each school gets \$650 towards this. In addition to that, the schools with PBIS get an additional \$350 towards school goals, which are primarily focused on social and emotional learning.

K. Bernard: I'm good for this section.

Chair: Shall this section carry? Carried.

Total English Programs and Services: 7,939,500

Shall it carry? Carried.

French Education, Programs, and Services

“Appropriations provided for the development, implementation, and maintenance of all programs of study in French First Language, Early and Late French Immersion, Core French, and the purchase of texts and materials. Appropriations are also provided for cost-shared programs under the Official Languages in Education Agreement and for a variety of services to schools and education authorities in relation to the administration of French programs.” Administration: 8,700. Equipment: 27,000. Materials, Supplies, and Services: 424,000. Salaries: 3,043,600. Travel and Training: 40,000. Grants: 498,600.

Total French Education, Programs, and Services: 4,041,900

The hon. Member from Charlottetown-Hillsborough Park.

C. Simpson: Thank you, Chair.

Chris, what percentage of this budget is covered under the federal agreement or does this reflect the entire provincial contribution?

Chris DesRoche: No, the vast majority of this division is shared with the federal government through the official languages and education. There are some components that are not. There are four positions that would not be eligible to be shared. I'd say approximately \$500,000 of other things such as grants, substitutes, Materials, Supplies, and travel that are not covered, not shared.

C. Simpson: Thank you for that, Chris.

With the salary component, then, up just slightly, that doesn't suggest that that's in keeping perhaps with collective agreements. Are we down positions in this division?

Chris DesRoche: The collective agreement increases in this division worked out to \$60,000. We have a target to save in this division of \$52,000, a net increase of \$8,000.

C. Simpson: Do we know what position is no longer there?

Chris DesRoche: Certainly, \$52,000 wouldn't cover a position. I think the hope is that we can improve our delivery model and get that savings out of sub casuals.

C. Simpson: They don't have a separate area the same as English program so the curriculum development that's happening here, can you outline that for us?

Chris DesRoche: Yes. In French programs, there is some work happening in K-2 and 7, 8, 9 music education, 4 to 6 Core French, 4 to 6 English language arts, and grade 9 social studies.

C. Simpson: Chris, is there anything specific happening with kindergarten and play-based approach to curriculum happening for French programs?

Chris DesRoche: We can add that to the takeback for the English program section. The director, again, is listening.

C. Simpson: They're listening, yes.

Thank you. I'm good.

Chair: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-Victoria Park.

K. Bernard: Thank you, Chair.

I know one of the things that we've talked about a lot is the low numbers of French substitutes. Does the department keep track if a substitute is needed and no French sub is available? Is that information that – do you know that they keep track of?

Chris DesRoche: Not at the department level. It may be tracked at the CSLF.

K. Bernard: Yeah, okay.

[2:45 p.m.]

The grant for French teacher recruitment and retention, do you have any information about that? I'm wondering how many grants were given out last year and were there more applicants than funding available? Can you speak to that a little bit?

Chris DesRoche: I can. That is a recent development. It was new last year, put in as French teacher recruitment and retention.

There are a number of different components to that:

Certainly, you may have read around bonuses and tuition support for French teachers that want

to work in PEI and are attending UPEI. There are career fairs, advertising, travel costs to visit universities, promotional kits for international recruitment. They're assisting with some costs of practicums in rural areas through some of that funding. Approximately half of the \$300,000 is related to the bursaries and the tuition supports. That would pretty much be it.

It's important work, as you know; there are shortages across Canada. We have seen some success with that funding. We have, in '24-25, hired 23 French teachers at Public Schools Branch and 17 at CLSF. In '25-26, 19 at PSB and 29 at CSLF. So, it's a great program funded by the federal government and seeing some results.

K. Bernard: Those are great numbers. Is there any provincial funding that goes towards that? You said a number there. Is that the provincial contribution, or do we not put in?

Chris DesRoche: The agreement was flexible enough for us to use some internal costs to match it, but it's substantially federal funding.

K. Bernard: Okay. I know we had a conversation – I don't remember if it was last year or the year before – about how different schools are picked to get French immersion programs. In this budget, is there any funding for expansions into any school French immersion programs? Probably not – I'm just curious.

Chris DesRoche: No, I wouldn't say there's funding for expansions, but I know from speaking with the director that there is a desire to review the composition of French immersion and core French in the school system.

K. Bernard: Okay. I'm good, Chair.

Chair: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-Hillsborough Park.

C. Simpson: Thank you, Chair.

I know one school that might be coming forward to ask about French immersion soon.

I'm wondering – when you look for austerity in the budget, you would have to only account for the provincial; you're obviously not able to make a cut to the federal. So, if you cut provincial, does it impact then the federal contribution, just by default?

Chris DesRoche: We have to maintain our 50-50 share within this division. The items I mentioned before that are only provincial. There's enough there to meet our budget target. But you're correct; we cannot adjust our 50-50 split. The 50-50 split is status quo until '27-28 – the amount of funding we receive for that agreement. Some of the positions within are becoming more expensive, but we don't have any additional 50-50 split with the feds.

C. Simpson: And are these becoming increasingly more hard-to-fill staffing positions, Chris?

Chris DesRoche: I don't think there are any positions that are not becoming increasingly more difficult, whether it's French teachers or English teachers or accountants.

C. Simpson: I'm good. Thank you.

Chair: Shall the section carry? Carried.

Early Years

Early Years

"Appropriations provided for early childhood learning, including grants for early years centres, child care centres, funds for the purchase of learning materials, and curriculum maintenance and support." Administration: 4,600. Materials, Supplies, and Services: 113,100. Professional Services: 30,000. Salaries: 3,332,100. Travel and Training: 49,800. Grants: 94,381,700.

Total Early Years: 97,911,300

The hon. Member from Charlottetown-Victoria Park.

K. Bernard: Thank you, Chair.

[2:50 p.m.]

For this one here, is there any funding to support the pedagogical services cuts? I'm sure that you've heard from numerous different centres, as have we, and I'm wondering if there's any sort of... There's nothing that's going to replace those services, to be clear – but is there any sort of support that government is going to offer as a stopgap?

Hon. R. Croucher: I think our support is going to come in the way of this working group and meeting with centre owners and staff to try and

chart a path forward, identify what truly is pedagogical support, what it looks like and should look like within our system and within our centres, and then take that information and work within what we have to try and assist centres moving forward.

K. Bernard: I guess my response to that, not that you asked for it, but is just that when we're looking at those sorts of services, they're hard to replace. I know government likes to say we're the envy of Canada for early years centres, but it's these sorts of cuts that make us not anymore.

I know we've made our point to reinstate that funding so I'm not going to belabour the point, but I think that that is a grave disservice, especially when we look at the inclusion review report for the schools that tells us we need to beef up kindergarten years.

By taking away from those earlier years, we're not helping with the students who are not potty trained, we're not helping with ensuring that our young children are as on equal playing field as they can be as they enter school. That is probably one of my gravest concerns with education right now.

Hon. R. Croucher: I'll just add to that, Chair, if I may, we are still far exceeding the expectations comparatively speaking to any other province in this country. Even with the reduction in that pedagogical support, we are still going to be the gold standard in the country.

K. Bernard: But it's not going to stay that way if you keep cutting it, that's all. I have made my point, and I will leave it there. You can say that, but I'm not buying it – but we can leave it there. I hope you're right. I genuinely do hope that you're right.

Do you have an update on how many children are on a wait list right now for child care spaces? Do you have that number?

Chris DesRoche: The number seeking care immediately, as of April, was 680. However, we do anticipate an increase of approximately 400 more children in the coming year. We have several capital expansion projects that are finishing off. There are ten that are expected to be completed soon. The 400 spaces will be all around PEI. There's 136 in Three Rivers, 116 in Charlottetown, 102 in Cornwall, 20 in Summerside, 16 in Crapaud, and ten in Mount

Stewart. We'll be seeking approximately 75 staff to support those spaces.

K. Bernard: Did you have a timeline for when those would be hopefully operational?

Chris DesRoche: Some are sooner than others. It depends on the project and when it's finishing. Some are further along than others. Some are already moved in. I hope that we see a lot of them in our second quarter, by the end of summer.

K. Bernard: I'm wondering about after-school care spaces. Will this budget get us any further ahead with that?

[2:55 p.m.]

Chris DesRoche: Yeah, you can see the school-age programs, there's a \$520,000 budget – \$400,000 was the forecast for the current year. We did leave the balance of \$120,000 to support the growth. We are seeing growth. In the last three years, it went from 1,198 to 1,207 and then this year saw substantial growth of 1,375.

Chair: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-Hillsborough Park.

C. Simpson: Thank you, Chair.

Chris, when you take a look at the early years budget, what was the net number that you were looking for to recover?

Chris DesRoche: Our entire department received \$16 million, like we talked about. We did allocate \$15 million of the \$16 million to this division, approximately 95 percent. We have substantial pressures and needs in this division that we had to meet. In particular, special needs funding has been increased and the largest one is the operating grants to early years centres. We've seen an increase in enrolment of 940 children over the past two fiscal years, with 400 more to come, and that is a very expensive endeavour – but good news at the same time.

C. Simpson: We know that the reduction that we've seen in pedagogical support and in the training grants – we know that. What other reductions have we seen? I respect the increases and I understand that. What I'm trying to understand better, as well, is what other reductions are there.

Chris DesRoche: In your tabled document, you will see there is a \$70,000 line – other early childhood programs – that has been reduced.

C. Simpson: What is that?

Chris DesRoche: Sixty thousand dollars of that was the *Dès la naissance francisation* program, and \$10,000 was – it varied by year what we used it for. It was just a small budget for special projects.

You mentioned the bursaries; the bursaries have been reduced through reducing the maximum grant available.

Family home centres – although it appears it's slightly down, it's only because there were a couple of initial licensing grants and a couple of capital grants that were extra in '25-26. So, they're just non-recurring; I wouldn't necessarily say a cut to that.

The one you mentioned, pedagogical staff, has been reduced by approximately 25 percent.

C. Simpson: Thank you, Chris.

So, no other cuts other than those. Accurate?

Chris DesRoche: Oh, sorry, there is one other one; however, we didn't spend any in the current year. There was bridge funding, a small amount of \$50,000. However, with the limited number of private centres left, we didn't have anybody in the program this year, so that one is zero as well, but forecast to budget is the same as – zero.

C. Simpson: The need for special needs assistants is increasing, and increasing like – obviously, the early childhood centres see these children before they hit the school system. We know the complexity is there.

I am hearing that it is becoming much more of a challenge to find special needs assistants who have a diploma related to the field. It's a highly specialized area that we need to focus on, so what's happening in terms of recruitment and support for special needs assistants? I know they're on the pay grade now – that looks different – but more and more centres are basically having to settle with a heartbeat and a pulse lots of times. I appreciate that the grant has gone up, but throwing money at it, if you will, is a good thing if you have the right people in the positions helping the children.

Chris DesRoche: Yeah, I think you mentioned the best recruitment tool. If we go back ten years, they were paid essentially minimum wage, and now they're paid to the wage grid, which over those same ten years increased from \$17 an hour to approximately \$31. That is certainly a recruitment tool. I think the addition of the defined pension plan is overall a good recruitment tool for early years staff.

But is there a campaign specifically targeted to that? I don't think so, but I can ask the division to bring that back.

[3:00 p.m.]

C. Simpson: Thank you for that, Chris.

Is there somebody on staff who's taking a look at data and analysis trends that would help inform the department when making decisions around what programs to continue or discontinue?

Chris DesRoche: There is a staff that works on statistics and data in this division. It's required because there's a lot of reporting to do to the federal government.

Chair: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-Victoria Park.

K. Bernard: Thank you, Chair.

The child care spaces that we talked about being added near hospital grounds – I'm wondering if you have any information on that. We talked about the potential of – I know the new Prince County Hospital project; I think they've got some spaces. I'm wondering about the QEH, if there's any funding in this budget for that.

Chris DesRoche: Well, those are the two capital projects near QEH and PCH. I do know the old Sherwood Home has been demolished. I think we're a ways away before those buildings are built and operational.

K. Bernard: So, there's no kind of stopgap measures to help with child care in those areas until the capital projects are finished? Is that...?

Chris DesRoche: No. I mean, we're still interested, and if there are any centres that are near hospitals that want to offer alternate hours or those kinds of things.... To be honest, there haven't been any individual centres that have

come forward. But if they do, we are interested in that.

K. Bernard: Okay. And looking at the alternate hours program, there's no increase there; it's at \$150,000. What if someone came forward to offer more spaces? Would there be money in the budget, or is that not all being used right now?

Chris DesRoche: It is all being used with the current complement of spaces. If somebody came forward, we would either seek to fund it internally, or if not, ask our friends in Finance if they can support us.

[Laughter]

K. Bernard: That's a good plan.

One of the things that we've already talked about, so I'm not going to go back into it, is the very high needs coming into kindergarten. Is there any funding in this budget to help support some of those things in the early years so that the students are more prepared when they come into kindergarten – for this upcoming school year?

Chris DesRoche: I wouldn't say a specific budget line, but I do know this division is working very collaboratively with the two boards. They've heard those comments, and I think they're working together to try to see what improvements can be made in the zero- to five-year-olds to better prepare them for kindergarten, but it is certainly a concern.

K. Bernard: The \$6.7 million for early childhood education – special needs: Can you tell us what those funds are for specifically?

Chris DesRoche: If there's a child with some complex needs that needs additional support in order to attend a program at an early years centre, the centre would apply to the department and we would provide a grant for them to hire an additional staff – a special needs assistant to work with that child, sometimes sharing with another child depending on the severity of the situation.

K. Bernard: The child care subsidy program doesn't look like it's getting an increase this year. Is that funding able to cover all the children who require that level of investment?

Chris DesRoche: No, certainly not. That amount that you're seeing, the \$700,000, is

through our federal agreement. There is \$700,000 set aside for us to contribute towards Social Development's child care subsidy program. That is simply our contribution, but the program as a whole is in Social Development and Seniors.

K. Bernard: Okay. Thank you.

Chair: The hon. Leader of the Third Party.

M. MacFarlane: Thanks, Chair.

The Early Years Centres – Operating and Capital line shows \$82,618,000. Just a quick question: Why are we including capital in that line?

[3:05 p.m.]

Chris DesRoche: It's a good question. Our minister asked the same question in the briefing, so I did prepare just a little more detail on that line for you guys. Point taken, and we'll provide this detail next year as well.

Hon. R. Croucher: I would like to table this document.

Thank you, clerk.

Chris DesRoche: That information is essentially the same as your tabled document; just the bottom four lines of that total the grants to early years centres.

M. MacFarlane: Thank you for doing that, Chris. This is helpful. You say the bottom four lines are grants to the centres, and they include the line that shows the decrease for the pedagogical support staff, but it also shows an increase in the line above for operating grants from \$56 million to \$72 million.

What are those destined for – that increase in the grants?

Chris DesRoche: We have a contract with all the early years centres that provides a funding formula at the back of how much money we provide. With the increase of 400 children, there's going to be approximately 75 more staff in the system that would increase our grants to the centres. On top of that, there is a 2 percent increase to the wage grid in October that would be funded through there.

M. MacFarlane: In a previous answer to a question from my seatmate here, you indicated a number of communities with numbers attached to them. You mentioned Crapaud with 16. Was that a reference to that municipality getting 16 child care seats? I wasn't sure what those numbers were, Chris, when you were listing them off.

Chris DesRoche: No, we're not quite there yet with that project. What that would represent is Merry Pop-Ins has purchased a new building with larger space and can accommodate more children. There are approximately 16 more children that will be able to be accommodated in the new facility.

Those ten projects are either low-interest loan projects or capital expansion grants that we have provided. Where they were provided in '24-25 and '25-26, they're finishing, and we saw this year a substantial increase in enrolments and expect the same in the coming year – the current year.

M. MacFarlane: I know a couple of years ago – I think there was a low-interest program of 3 percent, up to \$1 million or something, to get a centre off the ground. Then last year, I think it was – was it changed to a grant of \$200,000? Correct me if I'm wrong in any of that.

I guess there is still an opportunity for low-interest loan as well in addition to that grant, but what is in the budget going forward for the fiscal year coming? What is the intended financial support available to expansion or creation of new centres? Is it both low-interest loan and grant, or one or the other?

Chris DesRoche: No, the low-interest loan program did provide basically the interest rate differential. It was 3 percent, whereas the market rate is closer to 6 percent, for projects up to \$1 million. We also contributed \$200,000 to that project in that program.

However, if you did not need a low-interest loan – I should say that program is closed at this point. If you did not need the larger loan and you just wanted the \$200,000 expansion grant, that was also made available.

In the coming year, on that capital line, there are a few projects. We are now, I guess, bound to that interest rate differential each year as part of our grant. There is about \$300,000 of interest that we would pay to Finance PEI.

[3:10 p.m.]

The largest pool in that \$4 million is over \$2.1 million in inclusive materials and equipment grant. That program will open up soon and will provide funding for equipment for centres for physical safety, accessibility, sensory and self-regulation, and assistive technology. They would apply to our department, and we would provide funding to them to buy those things. A lot of them are playgrounds, it seems, the applications.

M. MacFarlane: Do you have an idea, Chris, when that's opened up for applications?

Chris DesRoche: Well, we did run it in the previous year. I'm not certain of when it opens up for the current year, but I can bring that information back to you.

M. MacFarlane: Okay, thank you.

Chair: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-Hillsborough Park.

C. Simpson: Thank you.

Chris, how many private centres or non-EYC's do we have now? He knows what I mean.

Chris DesRoche: Four private early childhood programs.

C. Simpson: Does that include the one that just lost their conditional?

Chris DesRoche: No, this document was prepared prior to that loss.

C. Simpson: So, five.

Chris DesRoche: Five now, yes.

C. Simpson: On an average of 50 spaces, if you will, per centre, does the Province have a target of 75 percent of the waitlist, of the number of children/people, 80 percent, and then we know we've saturated how many spaces or centres we need in the province, or is the target 100 percent?

Like, in schools, everybody gets the right to go to school unless they choose not to. So, my question is: At what point does the department say we've reached our level of licensed centres in the province and we're okay with this amount?

Chris DesRoche: That's a good question. There were some percent coverages through our federal agreement that we had to meet, which we've frankly far exceeded, which is good. Up to today, I've not heard of any former deputy or minister saying that there is an amount where I want to stop. Like I said, we've seen some tremendous growth in the last few years and hopefully we'll see it again this year.

C. Simpson: When you take a look – I'm going to go back to the data and the trends. The person doing the analysis of that would be making recommendations, is my assumption, to say this is where we need spaces and where we don't need spaces; whatever that looks like. What is the data telling us in terms of where spaces are needed in the province?

Chris DesRoche: Yeah, that staff would provide that information to the director and the assistant deputy, and they would work with ECDA to determine the areas of most need. I think the best indicator is likely the waitlist document, which I think is online.

C. Simpson: It is.

Chris DesRoche: Okay.

C. Simpson: I'll go to the ECDA. Other than Handle with Care, which was reduced – likely weaning its way out – was there any other cut to the ECDA?

Chris DesRoche: I think if you look at that revised document that I provided, it shows two lines for the ECDA. The operating grant for the ECDA remains consistent at \$245,000.

I don't think I would say Handle with Care is on its way out. I think we are attempting to modify the program. If we didn't think it was important, it would have been reduced altogether, but we're trying to provide that service more efficiently and more cost effectively.

Chair: The hon. Leader of the Third Party.

M. MacFarlane: Thanks, Chair.

I think I'll ask a question on the after-school care. Can you explain the department's financial contribution to facilitating access to after-school care? Is that just through the bussing service from the school to get the children to the centre for the after-school care? Transportation?

[3:15 p.m.]

Chris DesRoche: Sorry, as far as the provincial contribution to school-age programs?

M. MacFarlane: After school, yes.

Chris DesRoche: Yeah, there is a program – well, a couple of programs within it – under the \$520,000 line. There are two components to that. One is a one-time licensing grant funding of \$3,000. The other is – there's funding at \$300 per FTE child in the coming year for programs.

M. MacFarlane: The school needs transportation for its children to get to after-school care. Is that something that can be arranged by a request to the department?

Chris DesRoche: Well, the Public Schools Branch and the CSLF have their transportation system. I don't think I could say for sure that all such requests are accommodated. I think if it makes sense.... I'll use myself as an example. When my children were that age, instead of taking a five-minute bus ride home, they took a roundabout way where they transferred at Three Oaks and then took another bus to get to the centre. It was able to be managed, but certainly, I couldn't say, "Take my child from school to whatever centre I believe they need to go to."

[Interjections]

Chair: Members, it's getting a little bit loud.

The hon. Leader of the Third Party.

M. MacFarlane: I'll just conclude with this, and I'll probably send a note to the minister. Just in my district, Amherst Cove Consolidated doesn't have access to get to the child care facility in Bedeque, which is 10-15 minutes or less down the road. That's a challenge to get students to that after-school program. I guess that's the reason I was wondering if there was funding in the budget to facilitate the transportation, but I'll reach out to the minister on that.

Thank you, Chair.

Chair: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-Victoria Park.

K. Bernard: Thank you, Chair.

The family home centres aren't seeing an increase this year. What kinds of things do those grants cover? Is that what you asked?

M. MacFarlane: No.

K. Bernard: Okay.

Chris DesRoche: No, that is a bit different one. Yeah, the family home centre funding – we have now 21 of them that are licensed family home centres in the province. What that funding provides is two parts: one, it helps make that a more desirable career as far as how much that operator can make running a program, and the other is it provides the funding for them to charge \$10 per day to the parents.

K. Bernard: I'm looking at the operational funding. Just after having met with a few early childhood educators and interns, I heard some concerns about nutritional requirements being met, and materials and supplies for projects and stuff like that. When government provides operational funding, is there any sort of strings attached that says you have to meet this level of nutritional value? Is there anything like that that goes – are there any checks and balances that go along with that?

Chris DesRoche: Yes, absolutely. The agreement with early childhood centres is very robust and has many different requirements. That nutrition comment is pretty concerning. If somebody is in that boat, they should reach out to the department.

K. Bernard: Okay. That's tricky, just – anyway, yes. Thank you for that, and I'm relieved to hear that because they showed me pictures of some of the food and it wasn't – anyway.

Chris DesRoche: We have inspectors in this division that could go and check into that.

K. Bernard: Okay. I appreciate that.

I am good for this section.

Chair: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-Hillsborough Park.

C. Simpson: Thank you.

I'll just help out with that one a little bit. The inspectors would go in. They can take that in. The board will have a look at it, but menus are

reviewed. It's the application of the menu that gets confusing sometimes. That's just clarity.

My question – curriculum development, Chris. I think that the curricula – it's been a while that there's been taken a look at that. Is there any work afoot to take a look at updating the curriculum?

Chris DesRoche: That's an interesting question. I think I'd have to bring that one back to get you a good answer on the curriculum development side.

C. Simpson: Okay. Thank you for that. I appreciate that, Chris.

[3:20 p.m.]

The other thing, in terms of the transition protocol into schools, I know that the division does work hard to make that transition for children as smooth as they can. There was a transition protocol that was in place that was working reasonably well, and everything can be updated.

But the role of the special needs assistant in that function – can you explain what the transition protocol currently looks like, and what is the role of the special needs assistant in helping with making that transition for the child?

Chris DesRoche: That is also a good question that I think I could get better answers for you from the experts in early childhood. They are listening and they'll bring that back.

C. Simpson: Thank you for that, Chris. So, the special needs assistant – and I'm not meaning to jump into autism supports. It always drove me nuts that that wasn't in under this budget line, but what is the connection between the SNA and the autism support person? Does that program – one support the other in their role and function? Because often, they're the same. I'm looking at how that gets funded because the requirements could look different.

Hon. R. Croucher: I think we're getting a little bit away from budget questions here and more into the weeds of something that we can certainly bring back, member.

C. Simpson: I'll frame it differently.

Hon. R. Croucher: Okay.

C. Simpson: Do we have enough dollars to fund SNAs – and I don't want to leap into the next section because I sometimes – with the complexity of needs? With SNAs and the challenge – even though I know that the wage grid is there, and I know all the good reasons why somebody would want to apply, I also know centres that can't find staff because of the allotment of hours that they get. It's a good hourly wage but it's not a permanent job, if you will. How do the needs of children get met when it's hard to get those hours filled?

Chris DesRoche: It's a good question. There are constant challenges in hiring staff. Also, to your comment around permanency: the staff do follow the children, so to speak, and the needs that are there. So, I take both of those points, but.... Yeah, it is a challenge.

C. Simpson: I know you're going to go back on the curriculum side of this, and as best as I understand, there's no standalone pre-K curricula. Hoping that we're able to maintain what we know and do best in early childhood and not feel pressures to bring elementary levels down. Readiness for grade 1 is not – academics is only a small part of it.

So, this just pays the fees; this has nothing to do with curriculum in there, per se? The \$1.6 million?

Chris DesRoche: The \$1.6 million is support provided directly to the universal pre-K program, the centres involved.

C. Simpson: So, that pays the differential between whatever the fee is the parents are paying and what the operational cost is, correct? (Indistinct) operational cost to that.

Chris DesRoche: Exactly. For an early years centre, we provide \$25 a week per full-time and \$5 per day towards part-time. For non-designated it is a little different rate because the starting point is different than the \$10 a day. It's \$70 a week for full-time and \$14 a day for part-time.

C. Simpson: Do you have a breakdown of how many standalone pre-Ks there are, Chris?

Chris DesRoche: No. I have 87 centres operating pre-K programs. I don't have the breakdown of incorporated (Indistinct) centre versus standalone.

C. Simpson: All of the EYCs would have pre-K, I'm assuming, so it would just be the difference. Most of our centres are EYCs now, right?

Chris DesRoche: Yeah, there are 84 – now 83 centres.

C. Simpson: One of the challenges in the early years centres still continues to be finding qualified staff and the retention of that staff. I know that through immigration, there was a growth there. I'm concerned, with the reduction in the training grants, that we'll see a decrease.

[3:25 p.m.]

Is that a trend that the department is seeing? If you look at the wages that are provided, the higher the certification level, the higher the grant is out to centres. Are you seeing that dip at all, Chris, or are you seeing that the funding is remaining constant, meaning the staff are at the highest level of training?

Chris DesRoche: Sorry, could you repeat that question?

C. Simpson: I sure can. When you take a look, there's been – I'm concerned about the recruitment and retention of the most highly trained ECEs. With a reduction in that training grant to move people from their level 1 up, there will be people who will stay at the lower level, can't afford the difference, can't make – whatever their reason is for that. I know that the grant to the centres is directly linked to the level of certification of the staff.

Are you finding that centres are able to maintain the highest level of certification – because the highest level of certification, the better the service to the children – or are you seeing that drop?

Chris DesRoche: I don't have that statistic with us, but I would say that there are several different tools that have helped grow the sector, the Holland College accelerated program being one of them; some bursaries being another one. The Steps to Success, which is through another department, has been a very successful program.

It's all those in conjunction that have allowed us to increase, like I said, the enrolment by 940 over two years, and increasing program staff by almost 150 over that same time period. So, they

have been able to grow the sector – which is great to see – with all the different programs.

C. Simpson: So, you're not seeing a drop in the level 3s down is what I'm getting at.

Chris DesRoche: Again, I would have to bring back statistics on what levels are present in the system if they have that under their data.

Chair: Our questions are supposed to try to get specifically to the budget at task. I feel like maybe it might be a little bit out of his scope to comment on that, but just be mindful.

C. Simpson: Thank you, Chair. I was trying to get into that because I look at the grants, and I know how they're broken down, so I'm trying to understand: Does that mean we have fewer staff at the highest level of education? But if staff will bring that back, Chris, that would be great.

I'm wondering about special needs assistants and the role that they have; we've talked about that. The minister – we're doing a review of the EAs in the public system. Is there a similar review to look at efficiencies with the role and function of a special needs assistant?

Hon. R. Croucher: I don't think, currently, that that's something that's on our radar. Certainly, something that (Indistinct)

Chris DesRoche: Well, they are looking at that multi-tiered support system in the coming year. I wouldn't say.... I don't know if I can use the term efficiency, but they hope to provide better service...

C. Simpson: For the children.

Chris DesRoche: ...for the children within the budget, yeah.

C. Simpson: I'm good. Thank you, Chris.

Chair: Shall the section carry? Carried.

Autism Services

“Appropriations provided for supporting early years autism intervention services.”
Administration: 8,300. Materials, Supplies, and Services: 16,600. Salaries: 1,381,000. Travel and Training: 33,000. Grants: 1,948,000.

Total Autism Services: 3,386,900

The hon. Member from Charlottetown-Hillsborough Park.

C. Simpson: When you take a look at the full-time-equivalency staff, there are 11 staff. That's for the early years autism person themselves, right – the consultant themselves?

Chris DesRoche: There are 14 total FTEs in this division.

C. Simpson: Chris, with the increase of the prevalence of children being identified as being on the spectrum, what's the waitlist like? Are we able to meet the needs of the children – the numbers of children, I should say?

[3:30 p.m.]

Chris DesRoche: Yeah, that's a good question. You will see the grants have increased by \$215,000 in response to those challenges. As of April 21st – sorry, this is a little dated since I got this number – there were seven children on the waitlist for IBI. They hope, as the new school year starts, they can get those off the waitlist in the next six months.

C. Simpson: Thank you for that, Chris. The IKS program, the staff in the early years division – how far into the kindergarten year are they following? I'm looking at it from a financial perspective, getting those other seven children – or ten, or however it grows to – off the waitlist.

How far into the kindergarten year are these staff following school-aged children?

Chris DesRoche: I'm not sure if there's a certain amount of time that they follow them, but I think it is an important role as far as, like you talked about before, transitioning from this program into school. There's no intent to remove that program, if that's the question, to meet these seven children.

C. Simpson: I understand that. Then my question would become those seven children – often those children.... I don't know the ages, but very often they're maybe a year or two before school, so it's pretty critical that that early intervention happens as quick as it can.

Minister, is there any work afoot to take a look at increasing the complement of the staff who would be required to meet the needs of those children?

Hon. R. Croucher: If you look at the grants section, there's a \$215,000 increase, and that's to help support that work moving forward, knowing that we do have significantly higher needs coming in. It's certainly something that we recognize.

C. Simpson: Would hiring one more specialist or consultant at the department level clear that waitlist? What's the staff to child ratio there? I understand then it becomes you have to hire the person who's working in the centre, so it's two staff, if you will. But I'm trying to get at: how do we not have a waitlist?

Hon. R. Croucher: I don't know if one staff would clear the waitlist completely or not. Yeah, I guess it would.

Chris DesRoche: Yeah, the staff ratio is 11 as far as a specialist goes. But again, we do have children graduating out of this program and into the IKS in the coming months, which will remove those children off the waitlist as it is today. It is something that's monitored continuously to make sure that it's not growing.

Chair: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-Victoria Park.

K. Bernard: This section is – I mean, the demand, we've established, is growing a lot. I know that as part of the *Autism Coordination Act* that was passed – I don't remember how long ago now – part of that is that there's an annual report filed on progress and different things.

The last report I could find was tabled in 2020. Will we see an updated report tabled?

Chris DesRoche: We can ask Susie in our department to see what reports are available and we can take that back.

K. Bernard: I would appreciate that because it is such a high demand and it's changed a lot over the last little bit.

Is there any additional funding in here – as I mentioned in Question Period this morning, the training for EAs; there are a lot of EAs in our system that don't have the training required to handle some of these situations, particularly when it comes to autism. I'm wondering if we see any increased training or if there's any plan for increased training in that area.

Chris DesRoche: There's no specific budget increase for increased training, but we can ask the division to bring back what training is planned for these staff.

[3:35 p.m.]

K. Bernard: Okay. And by this question, I'm not suggesting someone is not doing their job; I'm suggesting they're kind of run off their feet. I was speaking to a couple of EAs who, after dealing with – well, two parts to this: they're creating their own programming for students, which isn't supposed to happen, and after violent incidents, there's no follow up.

There are two students in particular that I am thinking of right now, so I know that there are more that haven't seen the autism consultant or anyone to support the EA all year. They've been kind of flying by the seat of their pants all year, and that's not education.

I'm wondering what we're going to see in this upcoming budget that might help alleviate some of those pressures.

Hon. R. Croucher: Have you brought those concerns to anyone within the department?

K. Bernard: I haven't because they have. That's what I'm told.

Chris DesRoche: Are you referring to school-age autism?

K. Bernard: Yeah.

Chris DesRoche: Okay, this is only the early years autism section.

K. Bernard: Oh, this is just early years. Okay.

Chair: I was a little confused there, too, yeah. EAs fall under the PSB.

K. Bernard: I do have more related to that. If this was asked, just tell me. I know we have people in the early years diagnosing autism. Did you already have that discussion? How many do we have in the early years diagnosing autism now? Do we have people with early childhood education sector or is it through the hospital?

Chris DesRoche: No, that would be a health question.

K. Bernard: Okay. Under grants, the funds for intensive behavioural intervention, how many children get this intervention from that funding line? How long would the waitlist be for that? That might have been asked too. If it was....

Chris DesRoche: The second part has. The first part, of how many, I don't think was. This was at a point in time when I asked this question; there's 120 children currently accessing supports – 73 were in IBI and 47 were in IKS.

Chair: The hon. Leader of the Third Party.

M. MacFarlane: I just realized the description clearly shows this is for early years autism intervention services. What about school-age years? Where do we find that section or funding?

Chris DesRoche: The autism consultants for school-age would be in either Public Schools Branch or CSLF.

M. MacFarlane: Okay. I'll hold my questions until then.

Chair: Shall the section carry? Carried.

Total Early Years: 101,298,200

Shall it carry? Carried.

Joint Consortium for School Health

Joint Consortium for School Health

“The Joint Consortium for School Health represents education and health ministries across all provinces and territories, except Quebec. The organization is responsible for promoting collaboration within and across Provincial, Territorial, and Federal boundaries to improve the health and learning of Canada's children and youth.” Administration: 1,000. Materials, Supplies, and Services: 1,000. Professional Services: 31,000. Salaries: 217,000.

Total Joint Consortium for School Health:
250,000

The hon. Member from Charlottetown-Hillsborough Park.

C. Simpson: Who is the lead now, Chris, for this?

Chris DesRoche: Susan Hornby.

C. Simpson: I'm sorry. Which province is leading it?

Chris DesRoche: Well, it's housed with us.

C. Simpson: Okay, I'll reword this. PEI has not always been the chair, is that correct, with that?

Chris DesRoche: I'm in my 12th year here and they've been the chair since I've been here.

C. Simpson: We've always been the chair? What is the project, then, that is the priority that they're working on right now?

Chris DesRoche: This division is funded jointly by all provinces across Canada except, I believe, Quebec. The \$250,000 budget is a fixed amount. They determine the priorities within that.

[3:40 p.m.]

The annual work plan includes a healthy school planner development as well as a school wellbeing toolkit and a youth engagement toolkit.

C. Simpson: Is that youth engagement new?

Chris DesRoche: The toolkit was first developed in 2013 and has been updated a few times since that time.

C. Simpson: Is there in-servicing to either one of those tools in the school system? If so, do they do this or does that fall back on one of the other divisions?

Chris DesRoche: Well, this work, like I said, is pan-Canadian. It's a resource that is shared, and then the product is available to all the provinces. How this is then implemented in the school system, the exact chain that that follows, I would have to bring back.

C. Simpson: I'm good. Thanks, Chris.

Chair: Shall it carry? Carried.

Provincial Libraries

Provincial Library Services

“Appropriations provided for the management and operation of public libraries and provision of technical services for public libraries. The Public Library Service operates public libraries in 25 locations across the province, with

administrative headquarters located in Morell. The facilities include three French language libraries and French language collections in selected libraries.” Administration: 43,300. Equipment: 2,700. Materials, Supplies, and Services: 382,100. Salaries: 3,410,700. Travel and Training: 30,600. Grants: 6,500.

Total Public Library Services: 3,875,900

The hon. Member from Charlottetown-Victoria Park.

K. Bernard: Chair, I just have one question for this section. I think that our libraries in this province do incredible work. Incredible. I’m wondering if there are any new initiatives that government is funding this year for libraries. Not saying they need more, but....

Chris DesRoche: I wouldn’t say anything specific. I think what we’re seeing more and more is the more use of e-books. Last year, I think, we did add to the collection of what’s available as far as e-books go. I think the Library of Things is always being added to. I don’t know specifically what they have planned for this year, but it never ceases to surprise me the things that we’re now lending out at libraries.

K. Bernard: Yeah, me neither. I think it’s fantastic.

Thank you.

Chair: Shall the section carry? Carried.

Public Archives and Records Office

Public Archives and Records Office

“Appropriations provided for archives and record management services under the requirements of the *Archives and Records Act*.” Administration: 6,900. Equipment: 54,000. Materials, Supplies, and Services: 11,400. Professional Services: 3,000. Salaries: 2,260,000. Travel and Training: 9,400.

Total Public Archives and Records Office: 2,344,700

The hon. Member from Charlottetown-Hillsborough Park.

C. Simpson: Thank you, Chair.

The equipment budget line is down quite a bit, Chris. What is that?

Hon. R. Croucher: In the budget, we had budgeted for the electronic database records management system software of about \$240,000. Through its pilot and through feedback from other clients, I guess, if you will, it was determined that there was some negative feedback, negative references. So, we’ve stepped away from that software and we’re currently looking at different software that might be better for the province.

C. Simpson: Thank you for that, minister.

The reduction in salaries – we lost a staff person there?

[3:45 p.m.]

Chris DesRoche: Yeah, as the minister just described, we were in the testing phase of a software that has now been discontinued and looking for new softwares. We were getting closer to the implementation phase, so there were three staff assigned to that project. Now that we’re currently reviewing Microsoft and other platforms that might work better than the one they were exploring, we’ve paused those three positions until that gets into a place that we’re more into the implementation phase. That’s a substantial part of the reduction.

In addition to that, we do have two vacancies that we don’t intend on filling and redistribute those duties in the records management field.

Chair: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-Hillsborough Park.

C. Simpson: Do we have enough space to house – the appropriate space with all of the air quality and issues that we need – do we have enough space to house what we have right now, or are we looking for new space?

Chris DesRoche: Do we have space to house our records?

C. Simpson: Yes.

Chris DesRoche: Well, we’ve been continuously expanding the space for records since the day I started. The one in Charlottetown is full. I’m going to say seven or eight years ago, we moved to an airplane hangar at Slemmon Park. The reason we chose that location is the ability

to build upwards. We have filled the main floor and did do a capital project either last year or the year before to add the second level to those shelving units. Now we're working on filling that up.

The hope is that now that the tobacco litigation has run its course to a certain extent, we'll be able to dispose of records that previously we were unable to do so.

C. Simpson: I'm good. Thank you, Chris.

Chair: Shall the section carry? Carried.

Total Department of Education and Early Years:
131,390,700

Shall it carry? Carried.

Moving right along to page 50.

La Commission scolaire de langue française

General

"Appropriations provided for public instructional and support staff salaries and operating grants." Administration: 460,900. Salaries: 25,733,800. Maintenance: 1,798,900. Transportation: 1,235,800. Program Material: 277,000. Equipment and Repairs: 87,300.

Total General: 29,593,700

The hon. Member from Charlottetown-Victoria Park.

K. Bernard: Thank you, Chair.

How is the population in the French school, the numbers? Do we see a significant increase or decrease there?

Chris DesRoche: For the past five years, we went from 1,160, 1,211, to – '23-24 was 1,259. It has essentially plateaued since then. In '24-25, it was 1,256, down three students. In the past year, it went to 1,267 as an official enrolment. So, the last three years have been essentially status quo.

K. Bernard: I'm looking at the school counsellors and I'm seeing a 0.10 position, a 0.3, a 0.8. Do you have there how many schools that would mean that a school counsellor is going between?

Chris DesRoche: No, I'd have to bring that back on the assignments within the.... We provide them the overall pool and then they distribute to the schools as they see fit. I'd have to request that information and bring it back to you.

[3:50 p.m.]

K. Bernard: I would appreciate that. I know this could go with PSB or CSLF, so I'll just ask it here. I recognize it's a very raw, fresh subject, but just wondering about transportation, if there's ever been any discussion on changing a policy, perhaps, that would have school buses picking students up on their side of the road if it happens to be a highway or a busy road.

Hon. R. Croucher: Member, that's something that we had discussed in the past, prior to this tragic incident, and I've had conversations with department staff about. Certainly, nearly impossible to do that in every situation. It's much more complex even than what I envisioned when it was explained to me.

Our focus right now is on making sure the supports are there for the entire Island school community, but there will be conversations to happen on what we can do differently.

We have roughly 15,000 stops, I believe, 700 routes per day, and 264 buses. It's still a very, very safe mode of transportation. We've got experts there with many years of experience that do make sure that our routes and our runs are as safe as possible.

Are we certainly going to have conversations in the coming days and weeks? Absolutely.

K. Bernard: I appreciate that a lot. I recognize that that's a complex kind of thing.

Looking through here, does the CSLF have the same – there's obviously way less educational assistants in CSLF. Is that something that you're seeing increasing demand for, or are they seeing the same levels of complexities, I guess, would be...?

Chris DesRoche: Yeah, in a smaller scale, but yes, they are seeing the same as the Public Schools Branch is. It's becoming more and more challenging on that front.

K. Bernard: I think my last question is: Do we see an increase in educational assistants from

last year? Is that something that was asked for by CSLF?

Chris DesRoche: There is no increase in educational assistants this year. The priorities for this year were 1.5 FTEs additional teachers, one policy manager, and one HR generalist to assist with recommendations around school safety.

K. Bernard: Thank you.

Chair: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-Hillsborough Park.

C. Simpson: Thank you.

Chris, earlier you mentioned that it was a 4 or 5 percent find that you were looking for. Did that include the school authorities as well?

Chris DesRoche: No, I believe both boards are up in the range of 6 or 7 percent in their funding. It's more difficult to do that at the school boards because most of their positions are on the front lines. So, no, we're not looking for significant savings at the school boards at this time.

C. Simpson: That said, the salaries here are not up a whole lot. You talked there that two staff may be new. I'm just wondering, is it as status quo number given that, really, the numbers within the system itself have not really changed a whole lot?

Chris DesRoche: The increase does include 3.5 additional staff. Last year, we increased by 15 staff, and the year before, seven, so there has been a considerable increase in staffing over the three-year period.

C. Simpson: And all six schools would be from kindergarten to grade 12?

Chris DesRoche: No, I believe the one in Rustico is K-6.

C. Simpson: This is a program question. Is the plan, then, to just continue to move the children along or does it end at grade 6?

Chris DesRoche: Sorry, in Rustico?

C. Simpson: Yeah.

[3:55 p.m.]

Chris DesRoche: Rustico, when I did first start in the department, actually was a K-12. It was

very, very low numbers in the 7-12. I can't recall which year, but the school board itself determined that it would be better to be a K-6. Then, I believe the students in 7-12 would go to François-Buote.

C. Simpson: The program material budget has stayed the same the last couple of years, so does that mean that it's sort of replacement of material – buying new books, that sort of thing? But that doesn't read to me like there's been growth in resources to the board.

Chris DesRoche: There would be two components to that program materials. One would be money provided to the schools for paper and supplies and that kind of thing, and the other would be the actual free school supplies from K-9.

C. Simpson: So, any materials and supplies related to curriculum would come from PLMDC or through the department itself?

Chris DesRoche: Yes, correct. If it was textbooks, it would come from PLMDC. If it was a new or pilot program, it would come from French programs. And they do, in French programs – and English programs – some pilots through the years around interesting and innovative ideas to see how they would work. But no, these are school-based supplies.

C. Simpson: So, based on the asks that the French language school board asked of you through the budget process, would they have received what they asked for?

Chris DesRoche: It's approximately a four-month process, going back and forth and understanding priorities and fiscal realities. I would say that there's not a division or a school board that wouldn't be happy with more and more money. I think a 6 percent increase is a good increase in today's climate; I think it's fair. We do always work with them through the year to see how things are going through their forecasting and see if they're able to meet that budget target.

C. Simpson: So, with a 6 percent increase – and that's a good point because enrolments could change; needs could change that we don't know about. That means, then, if I'm accurate, there was a 6 percent increase and the board itself gets to determine what that looks like. They may have asked for 10 percent; they got six. Is that what I hear you saying?

Chris DesRoche: Yeah, we work collaboratively to say, you know: How much can the Province afford, and where is your highest-priority need?

As you can see, the administration line was increased. They did express that the office rent that they're paying while Evangeline is being built did increase a little bit, by \$9,000. We do have an incident management system that's being developed and does have a licence requirement, so there's \$5,000 for those licences, and \$5,000 for criminal record checks for the enhanced criminal record check initiative. So, that's \$23,000 there.

We talked about the 3.5 staff plus collective agreement increases; that's the \$1.5 million added to salaries. They did request, under maintenance, an inflationary increase for electricity, repairs and maintenance, cleaning supplies and products, so that increased \$12,000. Transportation was increased by \$9,800.

C. Simpson: Thank you for that breakdown, Chris.

So, EA support, for example – granted, it's fewer children so fewer numbers – you give the budget over and the board itself determines their allotment? Is that how that goes, or do they apply for a certain allotment from you? How does that work?

Chris DesRoche: Well, the starting point is the full-time equivalents or the positions they have today, and if they wanted less of something or more of something, that would be part of the discussion in developing the budget.

[4:00 p.m.]

No, we don't just issue, for example, salaries of \$25.7 million and find out after the fact how it was used. It is a very regimented process.

C. Simpson: Final question. With the total that you were challenged to find, Chris, the bulk of that was found – is this an accurate statement? – within the department itself and not at the school authorities?

Chris DesRoche: Well, like I said, out of our \$39 million increase, \$16 million went to the department, most of which was directed toward early childhood. The remainder of that \$39 million – \$1.5 million went to CSLF, and \$21.8

million went to Public Schools Branch. Both are approximately 6 percent increases.

Chair: Okay, members. It is four o'clock. Is it the –

[Interjection]

Chair: Just, member, give me two seconds to finish. I have got it worked out. I've got a plan.

Is it the will of the group to allow the hon. Member from Charlottetown-Victoria Park to ask one quick question before we switch over time?

[Interjections]

Chair: You've been granted.

The hon. Member from Charlottetown-Victoria Park.

K. Bernard: Thank you.

I'm just wondering – I should have asked this whenever I was on, so kind of a two-part question. Is PBIS in CSLF? If so, is it in every school?

Chris DesRoche: I don't believe they're using that tagline of PBIS, but I think it was last year we added some youth service workers. I'd have to bring back the specific positions, but they're running their own kind of version of that. I believe it's in all the schools, all six schools, but I'd have to bring it back.

K. Bernard: Okay, thank you.

Chair: Shall the section carry? Carried.

Total La Commission scolaire de langue française: 29,593,700

Shall it carry? Carried.

Thank you.

Hon. Member from Charlottetown-West
Royalty, is it okay if we switch over?

G. McNeilly: Yes, it's completely fine.

Chair: Thank you. Members, it's four o'clock. It's actually 4:02.

Hon. R. Croucher: Madam Chair, I move that the Speaker take the chair and the Chair report progress and beg leave to sit again.

Chair: Shall it carry? Carried.

[Hon. B. Trivers in the chair]

S. Dillon: Mr. Speaker, as Chair of a Committee of the Whole House having under consideration the grant of supply to His Majesty, I beg leave to report that the committee has made some progress and begs leave to sit again. I move that the report of the committee be adopted.

Speaker: Shall it carry? Carried.

Motions Other Than Government

Speaker: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-West Royalty.

G. McNeilly: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

At this time, we'll call Motion No. 7 to the floor.

Speaker: Shall it carry? Carried.

Deputy Clerk: Motion No. 7: Supporting small farmers and aquaculture operators.

The hon. Member from O'Leary-Inverness moves, seconded by the hon. Leader of the Opposition, the following motion:

WHEREAS small and medium-sized farmers and aquaculture operators are essential to Prince Edward Island's economy and food security;

AND WHEREAS these operators face significant regulatory and financial challenges;

AND WHEREAS the design and administration of current programs often favour larger operations that have the staff capacity to handle complex applications, reporting requirements, and regulatory compliance, while smaller businesses focus on their day-to-day operations;

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that the Legislative Assembly calls on the government to provide equitable support to small producers, reduce red tape, ensure fair access to funding, and promote sustainable agricultural and aquaculture practices.

Speaker: I'd like to call upon the mover of the motion to open debate, the hon. Member from O'Leary-Inverness.

R. Henderson: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

[4:05 p.m.]

It does give me great pleasure to raise this particular issue in this particular Legislature to deal with some of the issues that many of our farmers and aquaculture growers are facing right at the moment.

I guess I look at the situation – what precipitated this motion was the situation that happened when it came to irrigation funding. The department put together a process where it was kind of first come, first served, and there was \$1.5 million gone in three minutes. It really raises the awareness of – how is that a fair process? I mean, I guess you could argue it's fair; there's a start and a finish, and when the money's gone, it's gone.

But I guess I look at the issue that many large operations tend to be a little more capable; they have support staff to deal with applications, get them in at certain times. Maybe they're a little bit better at the wording. As you know, Mr. Speaker, some of our agriculture producers aren't the nimblest when it comes to determining a situation and figuring out how to fill out applications or paperwork. It tends not to be their forte. They tend to be quite good at growing a crop or raising an animal, but to deal with all the paperwork.... I know from my time in agriculture as a farmer, it almost became a large part of my week, the documentation and information that you have to provide government agencies.

I sort of see it from another angle as a former Minister of Agriculture too. I understand the importance of traceability, food safety – those are all paramount to making sure that we provide good products to the consumer. There are multiple issues out there around trade, issues that everybody is just looking for some little mistake to be made, and they try to pounce on it to take advantage.

But when it comes to trying to allocate resources to agriculture, I'm always a big advocate. I look at the Minister of Finance; I'm sure agriculture is important to her, as it is to this province. It's our No. 1 industry. It usually pays back in many

ways, in wages, payroll taxes. The circulating of money is phenomenal in the farm community. If you want to see money circulate fast, give it to a farmer. They're going to spend it, whether it's farm machinery dealers or fertilizer plants, labour and wages, and the list goes on.

But therein lies part of the problem. When we allocate certain resources, we tend to allocate to the industry or for a certain concept to try to deal with a certain issue. It could be environmental, it could be productivity, it could be issues around erosion control and things of that nature, but therein lies that maybe those – if you're allocating, say, \$1 million to that particular subject, maybe there needs to be \$250,000 of that sort of set aside for smaller growers. I'm running into that a lot. I think it is a big issue with some of the newer producers that are getting into the industry, too, trying to be able to keep up with the bigger operations.

The other reality: although we've done numerous programs around new farmer programs and trying to encourage new people into agriculture – and there's been some limited success in those programs – we're still seeing a decline in certain industries in agriculture in Prince Edward Island.

And I know. A good example that I use is in my riding; I have the O'Leary Road. It was designed to link Cascumpec Bay to the Northumberland Strait, so it's one of the longest, straightest roads on Prince Edward Island, and now we're down to two dairy producers on that particular road – one at each end, which is kind of ironic in that regard. There would have been – even in my time going to high school in the area, there were probably 20 dairy producers on that particular road.

Now, there are still a few fairly large potato operators, and we always argue that we're the undeclared home of the potato industry in PEI. We do have the Canadian Potato Museum and the PEI Potato Blossom Festival to celebrate all that, but it comes with an issue. I know what I see in the farming community. We have unbelievable challenges.

[4:10 p.m.]

Look at the issue with fertilizer today, the fertilizer costs. Those costs are usually based on the replacement cost of fertilizer, so just one little situation – well, wouldn't call it a little situation – in the Strait of Hormuz changes the

whole dynamic of what fertilizer.... I think 30 or 40 percent of the fertilizer on the globe comes through that Strait of Hormuz. Now everybody's speculating that there's going to be a shortage of fertilizer, maybe not so much this year but for the next year, and we're already dealing with the costs attributed to that.

The other one is fuel. You certainly can see fuel prices.... When the first missiles hit in Iran, I filled up my fuel tank at home and I think it was \$1.76 a litre. Now it's like \$2.30, \$2.40 a litre. It's a significant jump. I'm sure the Member from Morell-Donagh would see the same thing just in filling up his fishing boat. Those are significant. I think somebody was telling me that somebody filled up their fishing boat and it was \$8,000 to fill up their boat. That's kind of hearsay, but that's common. It probably is real. Some of those big boats have a lot of fuel. I'm not sure how many days that would cover.

It's a significant amount even just for me filling up my own tank at home. It's easily \$1,000 or better and I'm a pretty small.... I grow a few blueberries and ten acres of grains; not really a big farmer. But that fuel cost is very hard to predict. So, when you can't prepare for that – I mean, I don't know if anybody could have prepared for what's happened.... If I look at Christmas time, to say that fuel prices are going to be where they're at – nobody really predicted that.

That has a big impact on agriculture and your viability as a farmer and operator, and I find it tends to have a greater emphasis on the small- and medium-sized farmers who are less adaptable; they don't have maybe the cash flow or the operating loans to be able to handle taking advantage of those particular purchases.

The other thing I see with a lot of farmers today – and I see it in my own little bit that I do – is parts. That's probably attributed to transportation costs having increased significantly. The parts cost.... I can go into my local farm machinery dealer and – you come out with a few things in your hand and it's easily \$500. I bought, I think, six little shackles to connect a chain up with. They're just small, little ones for small 3/16" chain, and that was \$60 – or \$45 plus tax, you know?

It's just unbelievable what you pay for parts. I try to look for discounts where I can, but that's not always easy to get, and the cost when you live in Freeland or farm in Freeland or other

smaller communities, the transportation cost just to go get the bloody shackle is fairly expensive.

Hon. Z. Bell: Cuts into your record budget.

R. Henderson: Yeah, I had to cut down. I did a record order the other day, hon. member, and I had it cut down to just four. I couldn't get six; had to make some decisions there.

The other part is technology is advancing at a very rapid pace. I know the Member from New Haven-Rocky Point was talking a little bit earlier regarding how this technology is changing and becoming more complex, and your ability to repair it has become more complex – and more costly.

I tend to try to buy – the farm machinery that I have in my operation is all probably pre-2000. It's something I can repair; it doesn't have a lot of the technology and the computers. But even my own tractor – which is a 7210 John Deere, to give them a little promotion – still has a certain electronic component to it.

I know, probably a couple years ago, I had an issue with my transmission. I couldn't fix it. Had a person take a look at it; still couldn't fix it. Had to take it back to the dealer, and we had to float it back, and that costs money. They were able to put it on the computer and get it straightened out, but couldn't do that for my operation, and I couldn't figure it out.

That's what you're seeing with the complexity, and again, small- and medium-sized farmers just don't have the ability to purchase the technology to deal with that, so they have older equipment and they try to make that work as best they can.

I was watching something on YouTube, and there were two comments that said the two biggest impediments to agriculture today are – weather and government regulations were their two comments.

[4:15 p.m.]

Like I said before, I understand the issue around government regulations, but it is a big challenge that we make changes all the time, and rules. I know the Minister of Land and Environment is trying to do their very best in making sure everybody is good stewards of the land, but increasingly it's becoming harder and harder to figure out all this stuff.

When you drive around the countryside, you see all kinds of things. It's like: "How come that happened? That doesn't make any sense to me that that's happened," but it does. And then somebody else was charged for doing the same thing, and the other one isn't. None of it makes sense to me.

I've mentioned many, many times in this Legislature, and I see it in my own farm, around the wetland designations. I've got land I can farm on this side, and on the other side I can't, and I don't see one bit of difference one way or the other. It's all the same. If I was pasturing cattle, I can see they're eating each side; nothing looks any different. But yet, I'd be breaking the law if I plowed that – and the other, I'm not.

That just doesn't seem to be right. When we develop legislation and laws in this House, we should always be making things that everyday people can understand and it's obvious. When we make these things so complicated and difficult, it gets hard to figure out, and that has a bigger impact on small- and medium-sized farmers.

I always remember this issue. I remember trying to figure it out when we first came in with buffer zones – this was before I got into politics – and I asked the environmental officer to come down. I said: "Can you tell me the spots and we'll mark with flags where I can plow to and where I can't?" So, trying to measure 15 metres from the edge of the bank.... So, he's looking.... "I don't know."

It wound up that nobody really could figure it out. We took a guess and it worked out fine. There were no issues. The point is if the regulators and the enforcement officers can't verify exactly where the spots are, then how do you expect a farmer to figure that out? And inadvertently, you could be six inches one side or the other. Is that a major, heinous crime and you need to be charged? I don't know. I don't know if anybody ever was charged in those situations. But when you pick locations or make rules on something that there's not a defined, black-and-white, "This is where you start from and measure from this part" – that makes it hard.

If you look at some of the larger farming operations or even the forestry woodlot, they can punch information into a computer in their tractor/machine, and it's GPS-located and stuff like that. I've got none of that in my operation, and most medium-sized and smaller operators

don't have that either. So, we have to take some things into account when it comes to small- and medium-sized operators.

The other thing I've mentioned – I'll say in my time as the Minister of Agriculture – is when we look at the issue of succession planning. I will say that the current government is trying to do some incentives around good succession planning when it comes to agricultural operations, but it's so important. Those that are able to figure that out and do that in a proper management way and allow that farming operation to continue are the ones that will be a success.

So, if you can handle getting that succession planning worked out, if you can deal with technology.... And I always sort of said this was my failing grade in agriculture: making decisions with your heart, not with your head. For me, anyway, I always tend to say I'd like to keep that cow another year, give her another chance, or I'll try this in this field; maybe I should be changing to a different commodity in that particular field to plant. Maybe it's not potato land, but maybe that one year it is. Those are always tough decisions to make and we need to, as farmers, do a better job of that.

But it comes to the eligibility of programs, like I said before. We really need to see better clarity and better planning when it comes to how we develop these particular programs so we can allow small- and medium- sized farmers to have a chance at that. Like I said before, when we did the first-come, first-served, I would say that that didn't maybe work out as well as it should have, probably.

[4:20 p.m.]

I commend the minister for saying that he's going to look at that, but he makes the comment that we're going to do a lottery, that maybe a lottery would be.... Well, that's fair too, but I think we need to get back to making sure we're basing our applications on merit, on where the need is. I know that comes with a little bit of bureaucracy in trying to figure that out, but we need fairness, and we don't want to see all our programs go to one region of the province. We don't want to see it go to bigger producers. We don't want to see it go to one particular commodity. Maybe it's all the dairy industry that gets funding or all the potato industry.

I think there needs to be something, when it comes to applications, that there is some sense of merit. We've got some great extension workers in this province in agriculture. I think they can certainly help. I'm sure a department, any department – if we're focusing on agriculture here today, they could put together some sort of a committee of three people or something to take a look at these applications. You can set a deadline, announce a program – to announce a program and have the money gone in three minutes just seems like a complete inequity in fairness to all farmers on Prince Edward Island.

I had a number of calls from farmers calling me back: "Thanks for bringing it up, but we didn't get any money." They already started. They had prepared – even purchased or had an order in for pipe, and that type of stuff. That just doesn't seem fair to deal with that.

Like I say, to spend three minutes, spend \$1.5 million, and you have no idea where it goes.... Now, the minister makes the comment that he thinks it was done fairly well or fair across the province, but I don't know that. Do you know that? I mean, we haven't seen who got the applications, who got the money. We're just taking his word for it. Like I say, did all the smaller producers get a fair crack at any of that stuff? I've had other farmers mention that to me many times. They're saying there just doesn't seem to be much out there for them to get the funding that they would require to at least keep them as viable as they possibly can.

I did want to take a little bit of an opportunity to mention some of the farmers in my riding. I mentioned the two dairy farmers. I know the Minister of Fisheries and Tourism would know some of these people quite well.

We got a new producer, Daniel MacWilliams. He's taking over the farm out there at West Cape – real young guy; wishing him all the best. He's got a new young son just recently. I think that's maybe the fourth generation taking over that particular farm, and I certainly commend him.

The other dairy farmer on the other side is Ewen Stetson at the O'Leary end of the O'Leary Road. He's been a smaller dairy producer for some time. Him and his wife and son run that operation. He has an electrical business to coincide with the two; it seems to work out.

Another farmer I've got in the Brae that's fairly new in the industry – but his farm has been around for quite a while – is Justin Rogers, Picturesque Farms. He's now recently gotten into the dairy industry in the last.... I remember the Minister of Agriculture and I went and toured his farm. He's got a grain operation there, and now he's recently gotten into potatoes, growing some seed potatoes for producers in the area. Justin is a hard worker. He employs a number of people in the area. It's good to see those farms have a good succession plan and see new people continue on in that.

I mentioned another one down in the Ellerslie end of my district in East Bideford: Glen Ellis. Glen and Nathan Ellis have a beef operation in that area. They're probably, I'm not sure, 100 head maybe – maybe a little bigger operation. Glen and June – everybody would know June. You see her on the news quite often with the landlord association. Their son Morgan is kind of famous in our parts for playing in the NHL. He played four games with the Montreal Canadiens and just signed a new contract with the Ingolstadt Panthers, actually, to continue on there for another year, and has made a pretty good career out of hockey.

If I go back to the trivia questions, as maybe the Minister of Fisheries and Tourism would note, he is the only fellow that was born west of Summerside to have a 100-mile-an-hour slapshot registered at an All-Star Game. I'll just add that little bit of information to all our members here. I'm sure you wanted to know that.

[4:25 p.m.]

And I mentioned – actually, the other day I had a member's statement on Marilla Millar. One of her sons, Gordon Millar, is a farmer. He has a beef operation on the McNeills Mills Road in Marilla's old family homestead. He's doing a pretty good job of raising some beef cattle there, and he's a small operator.

But somebody like Gordon Millar probably never has gotten a dime out of government over the years. He just does it on his own. That's where I'd like to see these guys sort of be able to build their operations and make them a little bigger than what we have with the great big operations that are out there.

Another one I was going to mention is Corey MacLean. He's out on the Hamilton Road in

Dunblane. Corey has taken over the family farm, a dairy operation and potato operation, fairly modern on the potato side of it. But he's going through some challenges. He's got a son that's been diagnosed with leukemia; he's over in Halifax – Logan. It's kind of a struggle to try to keep their farming operation busy and keep the cows milked and things like that when you have a son that's in Halifax a lot of the time, at the IWK.

A smaller operation – I bumped into him yesterday – is Webb's Vegetables. Everybody knows them, at the O'Leary corner. Trevor Webb and Thomas Webb – Thomas is kind of famous for his music, the Grass Mountain Hobos, and his wife, Meaghan Blanchard, a well-known lady. She's a constituent who lives in the community of Milburn.

But anyway, Webb's Vegetables – I was talking to Trevor yesterday and said, "How's the planting going, the garden?" He said, "Well, my back is getting a little sore. We don't have a lot of help and probably going to cut back a little bit." That's unfortunate. We're having producers that aren't able to fulfill and utilize all their farming land. They're just not as, I guess, viable. That's where government needs to be there to try to maybe provide some incentives to allow those people – whether it's some wage supports.... And I know there's some student funding and things like that they've applied for and gotten.

One of my other bigger operations in my riding is MacLennan Farms, MacLennan properties. Everybody knows Katie MacLennan. She's the president of the PEI Potato Board; in fact, actually the first female president of the Potato Board ever on Prince Edward Island. I think when she was in the Legislature, I mentioned that they live in a hurricane-proof farm, and the ill winds of agriculture and potatoes, she'll be able to handle them quite well, I'm quite confident. But anyway, they have a nice operation there. They've been irrigating their farm for some time. They're probably going to expand that a bit too. I don't know.

Anyway, we have Gorrill Produce in Unionvale. They've been pretty active farmers for some time. Smallman Farms – they were one of the applicants I guess that applied for funding and, like I say, I think they were at the five-minute mark and missed out. But I have been told some better news has happened, that maybe somebody didn't take all their funding and that they're

going to get some funding now. I appreciate the government for their situation with Smallman Farms.

But there, same thing – kind of a succession plan is going underway there. Marshall Smallman is kind of the main operator there now, but his father, Derek, and his uncle, Chris Smallman, and his grandfather, Avar Smallman – Avar's kind of fading out of the business and the other two and Marshall are taking it over.

Triple S Farms is another one – same thing, going through the transition of retirements. They are fantastic farmers. If there's any farmer on Prince Edward Island – they've won numerous awards. I think they won the Gilbert Clements Award as one of the top environmental farms on Prince Edward Island. Their productivity is really impressive. They've won so many awards for good farming practices as well as Potato Producer of the Year at the Potato Blossom Festival.

[4:30 p.m.]

J and J Farms is another one – Jeff and Jason Smallman and Morgan Smallman. I think everybody has heard of Morgan around here. He's kind of a bit of a – Facebook has the reels and shows some of the farming techniques and stuff. I really appreciate their operation. I know last fall, we did a – sort of like the Minister of Agriculture stated, they had two classes of school students, but there's Agriculture in the Classroom that is promoted by the Federation of Agriculture – I'm not sure; one of the groups that organizes that.

They usually invite me out and we show the kids how to pick potatoes, where potatoes come from. It's quite an eye-opener. I'm sure – like the Minister of Agriculture had mentioned regarding grabbing an electric fence before you get a chance to say, it's the same thing with the potatoes. First thing, the kids are running down the field. There's no reason to run down the field. You can get all the potatoes we can here.

What it shows, though, is the issue about the lack of knowledge that our younger generation has about agriculture anymore. If you were never brought up on a farm, you really don't understand open space. You don't understand big equipment. You don't understand livestock that could be hazardous or dangerous. And we're in a society now where we're very cautious of every little thing, so people are kind

of living with a bubble around them and they're not as aware of what's going on sometimes.

But anyway, it was just interesting, and I did see the challenges that many of our educators face, when you have a couple of busloads of students in your field and they really have no concept of agriculture, per se; they're picking potatoes and they're throwing them around. It was just an interesting concept to deal with.

I commend Morgan for their participation in those particular programs as much as they do.

I have Dana Harris out on the Locke Road. He is a beef operator; just got out of the dairy industry. Once again, a relatively small operator. He's going through the challenges of a succession plan. I don't think he's got a son that's planning on taking it over, and they're trying to figure out where they're going as a farming operation.

We have Harris Bros., one of the bigger potato producers in my riding. They're also on the O'Leary Road. Great operators; they've won numerous growing awards. Both David and Bobby Harris are great. And Jenn; she runs Mid Isle Farms. So, there's lots going on.

I have Chris MacIsaac, also, out on Hamilton Road. He's a small beef producer; probably has about 50 head of cattle. Chris is going through some health issues at the moment too, and although one of his sons seems to be showing some interest, that's a concern I have. Will that farm continue on?

Then I have Adam and Kim Boulter on the Boulter Road – two pretty good....

An Hon. Member: Neil Boulter?

R. Henderson: Neil would be a relative, yes. Anyway – but Neil's a fisherman. I haven't got into the aquaculture side of things just yet.

Anyway, Kim and Adam grow some soybeans and blueberries, and they have maple syrup that they produce. I think that's the only maple syrup producer that I have in my district. I always try to buy Poplarline Farms maple syrup; I always try to get a couple of bottles every year from them. It's pretty good stuff. I even send some to my daughter over in Germany. She likes to get the maple syrup over there. It's more of a Canadian tradition – maple syrup on pancakes – than over there. But yeah, Poplarline Farms.

I also want to mention the Canadian Potato Museum. I dropped in there on Monday for lunch, and numbers are going good again. I'm going to give the Minister of Tourism a little credit, too; the numbers are up slightly – slightly. No hockey players have shown up yet, but....

The interesting part of the Potato Museum and the visitors that are going there is that there's a lot from the Mennonite population and the Amish population that go on vacations. It has become almost a premier destination for that type of tourist. You wouldn't think it, but I remember even being in a plane, flying into Charlottetown from – I guess that was when I was in Chicago. No, it wasn't Chicago – anyways, another time in the fall. There were people, this young couple, and they were Amish or Mennonite or Hutterite, something along that line, and they were coming to see the Potato Museum on their honeymoon. Go figure.

Anyway, I'm just saying it's quite a location. They have great food there. I know the Minister of Workforce and Advanced Learning – we stopped in for a bite there and checked it all out.

[Interjection]

[4:35 p.m.]

R. Henderson: Well, you know, you've got to give credit when it's due, criticism when it's due. That's my game here. I haven't gotten into aquaculture. I'll give you a lot more criticism on that one, maybe, than agriculture.

But I do have some issues in agriculture, and I raised it a little bit in a committee we do.

We are making some headway with increasing our herd size for livestock. I think that's positive, but I do think that there needs to be – once again, it comes back to the motion. In the reflection of the amount of money we're offering to retain, say, heifers for the beef industry, the price of cattle has gone up so much. You're looking at \$6,000, \$8,000, \$10,000 for a cow now. If you're only getting, say, \$400, it's not much of an incentive. I've even talked to some farmers: "Did you apply?" They say it's hardly worth it, the paperwork and all they've got to go through. That's unfortunate.

We need to have programs that people can find easy to access and that they can get money that makes a difference. If it's not making a

difference, what's the point of doing it? We're just wasting bureaucratic time and effort when it comes to that.

So, I do think it's important that we do as many programs as we can, and I would encourage government to try to look at whatever money – and I know how difficult it is, allocating resources to services and whatnot, but we can try to do it, we can take into consideration smaller operators versus bigger operators, and we can make our decisions on where we're spending our money based a bit more on merit and allocating some resources to a better circulation.

When it comes to the shellfish industry and the aquaculture, we're all aware that it's going through a very difficult time. For me, I'm probably in the heart of the oyster industry, the riding I represent in O'Leary-Inverness. I have no anecdotal evidence to say exactly what percentage, but I estimate that three-eighths of the industry is probably in my riding for all of PEI. It's not the majority, but the bulk of it is in the riding that I represent.

I'm getting inundated with calls and people coming to my office and text messages regarding situations where people – their EI has run out and the operator or the processing plant that they worked for is saying, "Look, if you can find a job somewhere else, you better go take it." That's just trying to give everybody a chance – and there are some tremendous people and workers there.

But I'm in an area that there's not a large industrial base. There's not a ton of jobs that are out there. I mean, there are always a few jobs, but they don't pay what that industry paid. Those people that were shellfish labourers worked really hard – as you know, Mr. Speaker; you've got some of them in your district – and it's very physical and demanding work, but it paid well. Now they don't have a spot, and they're nervous. They really are.

And their frustrations that they're getting that I'm hearing is.... Government has come out with programs, both the federal and provincial, and we've pressured as opposition members here to try to raise awareness of those issues as best we can – and to give government its credit, it has come out with announcements.

But here's where it failed: it has failed miserably in making clarity in the announcements that they make. They make a statement – I'll just use the

situation on the oyster buyback. They say there's, say, \$7 million or \$6 million for oyster buyback – and this is the federal government in this situation – but it doesn't say what the criteria is.

Then we go to the issue of the Province and it says it's going to provide some resources around training to the oyster industry; you're going to provide money for training. So, first thing, these people go up to SkillsPEI: No, you don't qualify. You don't qualify. You don't qualify. We can't find out who qualifies. Or that program doesn't qualify; you qualified, but you can't go to that program. It's all wrong.

The industry – and I know I've said to the Minister of Workforce and Advanced Learning: all of these people are going to be impacted, whether you're a public fisher, whether you're a grower, or whether you're a shellfish labourer, and these people need the supports that are there. We've got to make it simple.

[4:40 p.m.]

I'll just use one example, and this would be a neighbour of mine – a public fisher; has an oyster licence. He decided last year to go take a job and become a shellfish labourer for a bigger grower. A public fisher – now he's a shellfish labourer. The processor, the fellow he was working with, says: "I don't think we've got enough work to keep you for next year. Go find something else."

He decides he'd like to set up his own little business. He wanted to set up a little mechanic business and things of that nature. Goes up to apply to the self-employed business program through SkillsPEI. Anyway, he gets there and once again, he can't get an answer – don't know if you qualify or you don't. "Well, I'm a public fisher." Well, because you were a public fisher two years ago, you have to have income from public fishing this year, and if you did, you'd be eligible. "Well, no, I'm a shellfish labourer." So, he's waiting and he's waiting. His EI has expired or is close to expiring. He's starting to say, "I can't, I can't – I've got to make money. I've got to feed my family."

So, he decides to open up his business. Well, all of a sudden – now it totally makes him ineligible. I'm trying to help advocate for him and nothing there.

I'm hopeful that when the Minister of Workforce and Advanced Learning gets on with his budget – these are the types of questions I'm going to be asking: Why are you making this so difficult for these people? It's not necessary. I would hope that they will make some of these decisions – that they will go back and look at some of these decisions where they deemed some of these people ineligible and make them eligible. I think that's what I'd like to see in some of these situations.

I got a call there today and I gave the message to the minister on a processor. I've got processors – Five Star Shellfish is in my district, Burleigh Brothers, Leslie Hardy and Sons, JP's Shellfish, Oyster Kings Shellfish, Sweet Oyster, and Cascumpec Oyster, not in my riding specifically, but they're constituents – and they still haven't got their money in some cases. Of course, we make this big talk. The Member from Georgetown-Pownal asked questions that I had already asked a week ago on Seafood 2000. They've got some support.

[Interjection]

R. Henderson: Well, they were the same questions. They were good questions; that's my point. I was trying to give you credit. They were just late, that's all.

But anyhow, the point is now, as soon as these things get in the news – there was an article in the paper last week on my questions on Seafood 2000. But having said that, they read that and they're saying: How come we can't get any money? They haven't been denied. We're not being harsh on that.

It seems like they can't figure out what information is required because that's the first thing when I ask the minister – well, there must be information missing. I'm talking to the owner and the manager and saying, well, is there some piece of information you've got to get to government to get your money? Not that we know of. We can't get anybody to return our calls. We call, we leave messages, we're trying to get information and nothing. I'm hopeful that I did give the minister the actual cell phone number of the manager to try to see if we can get – what's the hold up? What's the problem?

This is what I'm saying, is that this is very difficult for smaller producers. Seafood 2000, a big operator, has a big impact on the member's riding in Georgetown-Pownal; I would say as

much as what the other company is in my district, but they're smaller. They're not technically as advanced, maybe. They might not have as big a payroll. But they can't seem to get answers. They can't seem to get clarity. I think that's what I want to see.

If government is willing to support Seafood 2000, there are probably nine other shellfish processors out there that are in the very same situation. I think government, when it makes programs, has to make them reflective of what these people need.

The processing industry, which I have emphasized many times, is 100 percent provincial responsibility. The one complicating factor, I've said with this whole oyster issue that we've been dealing with our aquaculture industry has been it's been a shared jurisdictional issue. We've got the federal government responsible for the public fishery. We've got the growers that are kind of half and half – half provincial, half federal – and then processing is 100 percent provincial. That's always created a bit of problem.

If I go back to the Shellfish Museum – and we hope this isn't going to be all bad news for them and create and enhance a museum – but I have the PEI Shellfish Museum in my district. Once again, see another little issue that comes to our issue. Maybe the Member from Tyne Valley-Sherbrooke got it resolved but from my perspective, I've mentioned to the Minister of Workforce and Advanced Learning, they get denied student funding; couldn't believe it.

[Interjection]

[4:45 p.m.]

R. Henderson: Well, that's what they said; they didn't get a student this year. Oh, I'm wrong. They did for the museum, not for the enhancement; that's right. It's not for the enhancement. But the point is that you'd think they would have gotten two students – one for....

[Interjection]

R. Henderson: Yeah, that's – you're right.

But the point being enhancement is a key component of – if there's anything to enhance in this industry. Let's hope that if there's nothing else, they have to clean things up and put things

away; a student could be provided to them. But yes, they did get a student for the shellfish museum. I stand corrected there, Mr. Speaker. I'm willing to admit when I have an error there.

But anyway, it does have a big impact on our industry. Once again, we're already seeing it; the Member from Tyne Valley-Sherbrooke did raise some questions in the legislature regarding the seed distribution. It is a big concern I have too – how we're going to support moving forward. If – and I put the emphasis on “if” – this new seed that they're bringing in from the United States has any merits and validity to fend off the parasites or not be as impacted by them, that we can see some light at the end of the tunnel.

And then that, hopefully – I keep saying this. I've said many times that I've supported the importation of seed. Didn't get a very good response from the Shellfish Association when I mentioned that, but I kind of say this is about trying to bide you time. Let's hope our shellfish hatcheries, which we have in Ellerslie or Bideford – the Bideford Shellfish Hatchery. Maybe they can deal with finding a solution and find some local seed that has immunity to MSX and Dermo and still continues to deal with Malpeque oyster disease.

If you bring some stuff in, you can maybe keep the industry going a little bit on some format, and then hopefully we can either crossbreed this stuff with the broodstock that they brought in that's in the lab in Souris, or if you can eventually get some sort of a morphed version of an oyster that succeeds in Prince Edward Island waters. So, that's the rationale behind that particular version of what I'm trying to say.

But I think when we look at how this has unfolded, when it has come to the funding, we've seen these producers – I know I had one processor that was looking at getting a fair bit of seed. Once again, he's had debates with the PEI Aquaculture Alliance on how that's going to be distributed. He thought he could take some of that, multiply it out, and give it to the smaller growers, but now – they will provide some support, but the smaller growers are going to have to buy it first, and then get reimbursed later. If you're getting it from the PEI Aquaculture Alliance right from the get-go, they will pay it right off the back and there's just a smaller fee.

There needs to be some working arrangement with the PEI Aquaculture Alliance to make sure

that they're distributing what seed they are bringing in to not only the public fishery, but also to our smaller growers. I really hope that there's some sense of thought into that. I have a fair bit of faith in the PEI Aquaculture Alliance; they're all good people. But they need to take into account there are smaller growers out there. There are people that need to be still allowed to try something a little different here and see if they can keep their operations at least viable and at least keep their investment operational as best they can.

Another thing that I think I feel about – I'm going to talk about the aquaculture industry a little bit. We've already had, I think, \$180,000 or \$130,000 or something like that, to MRSB to do a review for a long-term plan for the industry. The Province had announced the money for that, and they're not going to have – the report is due, I think, in August. Then we turned around and we had the federal government make sort of almost the same type of announcement, only they were \$130,000. I don't know if they're giving \$130,000 of the \$180,000 or.... Well, it looks like the minister is not sure either. We don't know that.

That's where I go back to – the information has to be a little more clear and thought out on how we deal with these programs. It's great to announce the programs, but when we can't get the clarity of who's eligible, what's eligible, or how much you're eligible for, it creates a big problem, which is really what happened with the seed.

[4:50 p.m.]

There was only a certain amount of growers who thought they would be able to afford taking the risk on purchasing seed that was brought into the province, but then when they found out the federal government was going to pay for it, well, then everybody was interested, and now the Aquaculture Alliance is left in the unenviable situation of being able to try to calculate where all that seed should go.

I just hope they put into some account, smaller growers and smaller operators to try to say – and the Shellfish Association and the public fishers, too – that they allocate certain amounts for them, because I know I get the comment and I've had lots of debates in my district with the public fishers. They'll say, well, it doesn't reproduce – the triploid seed doesn't reproduce. No, it doesn't; I get that.

But on the other side of it, if you look at what the Shellfish Association does, it collects seed – spat – it grows it to a certain size, and then it takes it and ships it, puts it out in the public beds. No different than if we're doing it, whether it's a triploid seed reproduces or if it's the regular seed, it's the same thing. You're still harvesting something that was put there by, I'll say an association or by man – mankind puts the oysters on beds and then they harvest them and fish them up. So, whether it reproduces or not is somewhat irrelevant. One oyster down is one oyster up.

Now, if all those public fishers all had spat elsewhere, then that's – and collectors, which they do do – but if that's dead, you've got nothing to multiply anyway. I'm just trying to say that there is some rationale behind spreading seed to the public fishery and allowing those fellows to fish them back up again. I think that's my point.

The other issue that the Province came out with – and I thought, when they first came out with it, I said this a good announcement; this is going to help big time – was the interest relief. The Province came out and made that announcement, and once again, pretty good. I said to many growers, there is a good announcement, the interest relief. But what disappointment we had – and I asked questions in this Legislature – when they find out that they can't even apply for the interest relief until January.

An argument could be made that we were going to cover the interest between now and January. I don't dispute that, but why can't you apply for it now and get that interest relief now so the government doesn't have to spend as much money? You can spread that money you do allocate for interest relief farther. These are the types of things that I think have more significant impact on our smaller- and medium-sized growers.

Another one that I feel has an impact on our small and medium growers is the issue around the Atlantic fisheries fund. Yet to this day, we still have not seen an announcement of the Atlantic fisheries fund. We don't see any money in the budget for the Atlantic fisheries fund. That's a program that's a 70-30 split with the federal government. We don't know the criteria yet. As a former minister who was the original signee on the Atlantic fisheries fund – it was with 80-20 back then, I might add, but 70-30 today; different times, fair enough – each

province will negotiate what the criteria of eligibility will be, if aquaculture will be part of that, or if it will be some of the new technologies, the new equipment.

Most of the Atlantic fisheries fund is designed to extend the shelf life of a product, make it a higher quality, and be more efficient. One of the issues that I see as a big one is our mussel industry, which is aquaculture – the tunicates. We are seeing a lot of spread of different tunicates. They are becoming more – I don't what the word is. They stick more to the cages and the nets and stuff and trying to pressure wash that off is becoming more and more difficult.

I know I've got a producer in my district that said, for a small operator, he thinks he's got a technology that he could do that very effectively and efficiently, but he's going to need supports. The Atlantic fisheries fund would be perfect for him. I've told him that and he knows that, but when is it going to be announced? I don't know. It was in February, but federally, the federal government announced it back in February that the program was eligible for provinces to sign on. I'm assuming that the Province hasn't negotiated a deal yet with them.

[Interjection]

[4:55 p.m.]

R. Henderson: I keep saying to them many times, there is a reason why we have a Minister of Fisheries. The reason why the Minister of Fisheries is for PEI, it has a big impact on our province – but you've got to get it done. You've got to go to Ottawa. You've got to pressure – you've got to talk to your MPs. It seems what I'm seeing with our industry is that they're tuning out and they're not listening to the Province anymore. That's unfortunate.

[Interjection]

R. Henderson: Well, they're not listening to this one. I'm only worried about this province; it's the only province I'm worried about – the small- and medium-sized producers of Prince Edward Island. These producers aren't having access to the Atlantic fisheries fund that they should be.

From my perspective, I do know how you go about negotiating that stuff and how you get them to happen; I've done it. It was a very

successful program. We have a Minister of Fisheries; that's why they've got to do and solve these problems. It's not up to the small- and medium-sized producers to figure this stuff out, it's up to the Province to do that, who represents them.

That's just an example of what I sort of see. But even if the Province had, in the budget, money for the Atlantic fisheries fund, you'd feel a little bit more of a sense of ease that there's some money to play with and we can multiply that. If we're putting in 30 percent, there's 70 percent federal coming, right?

[Interjection]

R. Henderson: Yeah, we can figure that out; it's not that difficult.

Like I keep saying, this industry has a big impact on the economy, especially in my riding. We have probably \$27 million to \$30 million worth of sales; that could be all gone.

Now, there's still some guys getting some oysters. I'm hearing there are some public fishers having some success in the east. I also heard Grand River has some good oysters from the growing side, for some reason. What happened there, I'm not sure.

But when we get big areas like Cascumpec Bay, which the Minister of Fisheries and I share, and Malpeque Bay – me and Tyne Valley-Sherbrooke share that one – those are big areas. I'm blessed with only Enmore and Percival – that's a complete write-off, those two. But anyway, I wasn't able to share that one with anybody.

But anyhow, my point is that there are pretty significant impacts on the economy and we're seeing that happen in my riding. I feel for those people, and I'll do my best to raise that awareness. But I certainly would encourage the Minister of Fisheries to at least return calls. I know I gave him a message today; he'll give them a call and hopefully try and figure out what the problem is there.

But I've got a lot of producers and a lot of processors and growers that are really hurting. They know when the minister stands up and he says, you know, it's the federal government's fault, or that they got approved for their funding but they didn't actually get the cheque; they all

know that. There's still some of them trying to get their cheques.

I just encourage this government to be very clear. When you're announcing a program, let's get the criteria out there quickly. You've had two years; it's not that it's been new that this industry problem was in trouble. When it comes to Workforce and Advanced Learning and Economic Development, we should have some clarity to what's eligible and how much is eligible.

With that, I will conclude my remarks. I guess if this motion ever gets back to the floor in a vote, I can conclude more remarks on that, but I'll hand it over to my seconder at this point.

Thanks, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: We can hardly wait, member.

I'd like to call upon the seconder of the motion, the hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Hon. H. Perry: Mr. Speaker, it's a pleasure to rise today and second this motion that is very important, especially to our small farmers and anybody involved in the aquaculture industry in Prince Edward Island, that was brought forward by the Member from O'Leary-Inverness.

My 15 years in here, I've known that he's always been a huge advocate for the agriculture sector and/or the aquaculture sector. As he mentioned, probably the majority of the aquaculture – and a lot of the farming on Prince Edward Island – is in his district. I do thank him for his passion and advocacy that he brings forward for them.

In my district, in particular, we don't have a lot of farms. The primary is lobster fishing. But we do have probably – I think there are four dairy farms, five beef operations, and one sheep. There's a lot of blueberry farms, though, in my area, so that's one thing, and they have the co-operative. The blueberry co-operative is very, very active within my district. All of these in the agriculture industry, in particular, need to have support.

[5:00 p.m.]

We're seeing so many of these small farms disappear. I know what the member talked about earlier, about the O'Leary Road going in through Knutsford right through West Cape

having 20-plus small farms in the '80s and '90s, gone down to two dairy farms at each end right now. You see that, and it's sad to see that, that these small farms are disappearing. A lot of times we like to see succession go with one generation to the next.

An Hon. Member: Call the hour.

G. McNeilly: Extend the hour.

Speaker: The hour has been called.

Should the hour be extended?

[Interjections]

Speaker: Alright, you can go ahead, member.

Hon. H. Perry: There was a no.

Speaker: Was there a no over there? Oh, I didn't hear the no.

[Laughter]

Speaker: Okay, can you adjourn debate with a seconder, or did you do that?

Hon. H. Perry: No, I didn't (Indistinct).

Mr. Speaker, I will adjourn debate, seconded by the hon. Member from Charlottetown-West
Royalty.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Kensington-Malpeque.

M. MacKay: Mr. Speaker, I move, seconded by the hon. Member from Charlottetown-Belvedere, that this House adjourn until Wednesday, May 27th, at 1:00 p.m.

Speaker: Shall it carry? Carried.

[The Legislature adjourned until Wednesday, 27 May 2026 at 1:00 p.m.]