

December 7, 2016

[Original]

French Immersion

Mr. Higgs: The first report cards of the new school year went home just a few days ago. Now, parents of kindergarten-aged children have less than two weeks to make a critical decision for the next 12 years of their child's education—early immersion or not. They have many concerns. Classroom teachers have many concerns. We have many concerns. Retired teachers have many concerns. I would like to share a paragraph from one of the letters sent to the Premier, the Education Minister, me, and the other party leaders.

Two Anglophone school districts have called for a delay. They are at the ground level. They understand the needs and the ramifications of implementation. Their concerns must be considered. A quality education for New Brunswick's students should never be a matter of politics.

This was from the letter of the retired teachers.

I will begin today's question period by once again asking the Premier to press pause on this political decision.

[Translation]

Hon. Mr. Gallant: As I have said several times, we based what we did on a report sanctioned by the previous government. This report was prepared by two former Ministers of Education, one Conservative and one Liberal.

[Original]

We have based our decision on a 2012 report that was commissioned by the previous government, in which the Leader of the Opposition was the Minister of Finance. It specifically said that French immersion in Grade 1 is the best way to go for our province. It is important to note that this report was done by two former Education Ministers, one of a Liberal government and one of a Conservative government. It is important to note that they were independent. It is important to note that they consulted with New Brunswickers, teachers, educators, experts, and students themselves. We followed that report from 2012. We made a commitment in 2014, and we are following through with that commitment now, here today.

Mr. Higgs: The Premier often talks about the report, a report that was very focused on one issue. We did not follow that report. We did not have it in our platform because we had



responses back from teachers in the classroom. We had concerns that stability was more important in the classroom. Understanding the results from Grade 3 was more important for the classroom than our following a report that was very narrow-minded on one issue.

What I am trying to point out here is that people have concerns. There is more from the retired teachers. Remember that there are more than 2 700 proven, experienced experts. They represent literally a millennium of classroom experience. When they speak about education, any intelligent person would do well to listen. Our retired teachers wrote:

Indications are enrollment in Grade 3 Immersion entry point was higher than in the final year of the grade 1 entry.

—when it existed previously—

Does this suggest, perhaps, that parents were more prepared to consider immersion once their children had literacy and numeracy basics in their first language? Has the success of Grade 3 entry been evaluated and compared, in a meaningful way?

Mr. Speaker: Time.

Hon. Mr. Gallant: I think that this tells us that many parents across this province would like to see their children go into French immersion. That is a great thing. There is a report that was done in 2012 that said that the best time to offer French immersion is in Grade 1.

I still do not understand, and I am still very surprised that the opposition members are trying to pretend that this report does not exist. When they do acknowledge the report, they question its credibility. It was their government that sanctioned the report. It was their government that put the parameters in place for the report. It was their government that selected the people who were involved in delivering this report. It was a nonpartisan process. It was independent. They listened to stakeholders across the province. They listened to teachers, educators, and people who have a stake in the future of our province and want to see our education system thrive. They came to the conclusion that restoring French immersion to Grade 1 is the right thing to do for our province. That is what we are doing.

Mr. Higgs: It is always convenient to hang your hat on one report, to go back to a report that was narrow-minded in focus. Look at the current statistics. People are saying in droves that this is wrong and that we need stability.

It is no secret that, without comparable data of a graduating class from the Grade 3 entry point, no meaningful comparison can be made. Our retired teachers—those 2 700-plus classroom veterans—write:



Meaningful and lasting change takes time. It takes careful planning.

It takes careful planning. By his own admission, the Premier does not have a plan or resources in place for this drastic, politically motivated change. The 2017 school year is less than nine months away. The Premier's claims that resources and a plan will be in place ring hollow. If he will not listen to anyone else, will the Premier listen to our retired teachers who, unprecedentedly, have written a letter, saying: Bring stability to our classrooms? Will he press pause on this change to early immersion and let the facts speak for themselves? Thank you.

Hon. Mr. Gallant: It is interesting to see the Leader of the Opposition pick and choose the facts that he feels like following. The facts of the matter are that there was a report done in 2012 that was independent and nonpartisan, done by two former Education Ministers of our province, one Conservative and one Liberal. They listened to New Brunswickers. They listened to experts, and they themselves came to the conclusion that restoring French immersion to Grade 1 was the right approach for New Brunswick. This was a report commissioned by the Leader of the Opposition's government when he was the Minister of Finance. He cannot pick and choose the facts that he wants to follow. Those are the facts.

Now, we are going to do everything that we, as a government, can to try to mitigate some of the challenges that the previous way that we went about French immersion in Grade 1 created. We recognize that there are some challenges. We have committed to investing more in education. We have committed to doing everything that we can to mitigate those challenges to the best of our ability, and we are confident that, by investing more in education, we are going to give our children the system that they deserve.

Mr. Higgs: It is ironic that the Premier is putting so much attention on a report that obviously, narrow in focus, was not even part of his own 10-year plan. Even the cochair said: We want stability above all. We do not believe in implementing anything that will disrupt the classrooms, such as this.

We do not have the facts on the Grade 3 immersion, yet the Premier puts such focus on facts. I want to refer again to the wisdom of our retired teachers. They point out:

Classroom teachers, school administrators and support staff live the realities of their school communities and classrooms every day. They take concepts and turn them into reality. They know the resources and support that must be taken into consideration and put in place.

I could not agree more. As we know, our classroom teachers, administrators, and support staff are muzzled by fear for their jobs and careers if they speak out. Has the Premier given any further consideration to my offer to help put in place a mechanism—a mechanism that will go



beyond the political mandates, where the present-day experts can share their wisdom and knowledge and make this the best...

Mr. Speaker: Time, member.

Hon. Mr. Gallant: It is really interesting to hear the Leader of the Opposition. In one breath, in one argument, he will say that the results that we are getting in our education system are not what we want. He has the audacity to call our education system broken. Then, he is advocating, on the same day, in the next breath, in the next argument, for stability. We are not going to offer a type of stability that makes us have the same results that we all want to see improved. We are going to offer a stability with the change and reform in our education system that was presented with our 10-year education plan.

[Translation]

One of the reasons we developed 10-year education plans with the assistance of the opposition was to bring stability to the system. However, we are not going to accept the status quo, because it does not give us the results we want for our young people.

[Original]

We have a 10-year education plan in place. It is going to offer stability, and we are going to make record investments to make sure that we get the results that are wanted.

Mr. Higgs: We agree. A 10-year plan—let's focus on that. The Premier says: We want stability. Let's focus on that. The Premier says: This new program is going to make changes. Doing the same thing that we did 10 or 15 years ago is not the answer to the future. We did not get the results that we needed then. We seem to be getting better results with Grade 3 by higher participation, but our overall results are very poor. Our system is indeed broken.

As many families are contending with the hustle and bustle of the holiday season, parents of kindergarten-aged children also have early immersion weighing on their minds. They have been told that they must decide by December 20 whether to place their children in Grade 1 immersion or not. They have been told that they must have faith in the Premier's empty rhetoric that he will have a plan and resources in place. They have been told that they must ignore our classroom teachers, thousands of retired teachers, district education councils, and parents when it comes to the best possible education for their children. This is a terrible burden to place on the parents. Will the Premier put our children first and politics second and press pause on this political move to Grade 1...

Mr. Speaker: Time, member.



Hon. Mr. Gallant: The Leader of the Opposition says this is a political decision, but he does not even have the courtesy to acknowledge that a report sanctioned by the previous government suggested and recommended that the early French immersion entry point be restored to Grade 1.

This is not a political decision, but rather a decision that will support our young people. It is a decision that shows we are listening to New Brunswickers; it is a decision that was recommended in a nonpartisan, independent report.

[*Original*]

I have to ask the Leader of the Opposition to tell New Brunswickers why he is so fixated on only offering the following statements about our education system: that it is broken, in his opinion; that French immersion is to blame for all the problems and challenges that we face in our education system; and that we are not offering stability, yet he wants to change the system completely. And why is he arguing that we should not invest more in education?

Mr. Speaker: Time, Premier.

Mr. Higgs: The Premier offered early on that we want fact-based decision-making. Less than 10% of our kids graduating out of the French immersion program are meeting the provincial standard, and that standard is not high enough to qualify for a job in the province. You say that is all right. I do not think that is all right. You have 70% of the kids going through an English system who are not even beginning to become bilingual. This is after 40 years. Do we think that is all right? I do not think that is all right. We have the Minister of Education saying: Mediocrity is fine. This is not a problem for our province. Look at me—I got elected several times.

I think that we should shoot for number one, not mediocrity. I think we should be number one in the province. You are proposing a 10-year plan. I want to be part of that. I want to sign off on a plan that avoids political interference in the classroom on a go-forward basis. Let's not mess it up. We have an opportunity right now to build a bridge to the classrooms of the future. Mr. Premier, let's make it work.

Hon. Mr. Gallant: The Leader of the Opposition's fixation on French immersion is worrisome. The way he is using French immersion as a scapegoat for the challenges facing our education system is worrisome. The fact that he is trying to muddy the waters and give the impression that there is no plan is very worrisome. Where was he over the last two years? We have been working hard—with members of the opposition, on top of that—to develop 10-year education plans. He is talking as though he does not even know they exist.

The only time that there was no plan in place was when he was Minister of Finance. The only reason we face challenges in our system right now—or I should say the main reason—is that he



cut into education when he was Minister of Finance. Now, he has the audacity to call the system broken after he cut into education. He has the audacity to say that French immersion is the problem and the source of all our challenges. He has the audacity to say that we are wrong when we say that we want to invest the most in education in the history of our province.

Mr. Higgs: I appreciate the philosophy on the other side. They just throw money and hope it will get better. It was stated by the Minister of Education and the Premier that the plan has to be put together in order to make this change happen in French immersion.

Yes, I am focused on our whole system. Not only are we not meeting our standards and becoming a bilingual province, as we should easily be after 40 or 50 years, with all children becoming bilingual and being bilingual when they graduate, but our academics, our math and sciences, are ninth in the country. This is unacceptable. So why do we not get together on a long-term plan? Your own cochair said: Do not disrupt this. Do not throw a mess into the classrooms by making changes that are not well planned and well thought out. Understand the facts on the current program before you go and introduce another.

You have all these things and all these people saying not to do this, yet, you, bold-faced, move on and say that you are going to do it, all because of a political decision. There we go again.

Mr. Speaker: Time.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Mr. Gallant: Once again, the Leader of the Opposition did not ask a question, but I must respond to his comments.

[*Original*]

First off, he wants to sign off on a 10-year education plan. Well, he should have been doing his job as an MLA over the past 10 years and participating in the process that we put in place to develop our 10-year education plans. Other members of the opposition did. Maybe the leader was too busy running his leadership campaign.

We put a good process in place, and we have delivered strong 10-year education plans offering the stability that New Brunswickers need.

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker: Order.

Hon. Mr. Gallant: He says that he is talking about the whole system. I think it is pretty clear, after the last 10 question periods, that he is fixated on one thing. He is fixated on French



immersion, and he is trying to blame it for all the challenges that we face in our education system.

Last but not least, the Leader of the Opposition is making it clear again what the difference is between us and them. The difference is that he wants to cut in education and thinks that there is enough money in education and we want to invest more in education.

Mr. Higgs: There is a clear difference. It is a very clear difference. I want to get results that benefit this province. I want to get results that you can measure, not results that you just throw out or fabricate. I want to stick on a point in education because we do not have results. I want to stick on a point that says: Our kids can do better. Our kids can be the best in this country.

However, what do we want to do? We want to throw money. People will feel good because we are throwing money at it. We do not want to listen to the classroom teachers. What would they know about teaching? What did the president of the NBTA say? The last thing that teachers have a chance to do is teach.

What is the issue? It is deeper than just throwing something more in and hoping for the best or, more importantly, throwing something in that we have already done and hoping for the best. We can fix this, but we cannot do it with this continual political rhetoric and by avoiding the issues. I will not avoid the issues. Our kids can be better, and I want to fight for them. Mr. Premier, let's do it.

Hon. Mr. Gallant: Again, there was no question from the Leader of the Opposition. We can change the name of this to rant period, if he wants.

I do not understand how the member opposite can get up and lecture us on results. When he was the Minister of Finance, he did not hit any of his targets to reduce the deficit. We are hitting them all.

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker: Order.

Hon. Mr. Gallant: All the while, we are investing more in education and more in health care and we are growing the economy at record rates.

I will not even take the time to go through his economic record because I do not want to embarrass him today, but I will talk about ours. In 2015, the economy grew by 2.3%. Working with New Brunswickers, we had the greatest economic growth rate since 2004 and we had the third best in Canada. We have increased wages at the fastest rate in Canada. We are doing that and investing more in education and health care, and we are getting our fiscal house in order.



Economy

Mr. Higgs: Sure, let's talk economics. We had a track record that actually measured performance. The members opposite have one that they fabricate. The Auditor General does not agree with it. Richard Saillant does not agree with it. They fabricate a deficit, and then they take out a contingency fund to make it look as though it is coming down. They say that they have had this great growth rate. The oil industry and forestry are the reasons for that. What are they going to talk about next year? There is nothing in the plan that actually makes a change. The results that were happening were clear. They were getting better.

All I want to do is to help get on another track that is measured by a real performance, not a fabricated performance from the Premier's Office. We see all kinds of squirrels running around the rooms. Those are squirrels to try to deflect from the real issues. We will stay focused on the real issues because the real issues are what is going to fix this province. Premier, let's measure real success, not fabricated success from your office.

Hon. Mr. Gallant: There was still no question, but this is fantastic. This is great.

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker: Order.

Hon. Mr. Gallant: I will talk about the record of the former Minister of Finance any day. In his record, he did not hit any of his targets to reduce the deficit yet he still cut in education. Yet, he still did not invest in health care. I will talk at length on his economic record as the Minister of Finance because we had the worst economic growth rate in a generation under his government, when he was the Minister of Finance. He just does not get it. You cannot cut your way to prosperity. You have to make strategic investments.

In fact, from 2006 to 2014, the cumulative growth rate of the province was about 2%. In 2015 alone, we grew the economy by 2.3%. This is the fastest growth rate since 2004, the third best in the country. Those are our measurable results.

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker: Order.

WorkSafeNB

Mr. Oliver: Understandably, there is a great deal of concern about the huge increase in WorkSafeNB premiums—an average of 33%. The minister involved chose to use his media



contacts to attack and blame WorkSafeNB while ducking the responsibility. It is one of the few things that this government seems to have perfected.

In listening to Joel Richardson of CME, he said that massive worker compensation increases, which came largely unannounced, jeopardize every employer's ability to cover its operating costs. I would like to ask the minister to help us understand the timeline on this issue. When did the minister first learn that rates would be increasing? When did he meet with the board to discuss this increase?

[*Translation*]

Hon. Mr. Arseneault: I find it slightly ironic that the opposition is asking us questions on WorkSafeNB and is politically attacking us on this file, for if we really want to look at the root of some of the challenges this Crown corporation is facing, we will see this is the Conservatives' fault.

When the Conservatives were in government, in 2013, they tabled a bill to make changes to the first phase of recommendations. This had an impact of over \$40 million on WorkSafeNB finances. These are situations that this Crown corporation has to manage.

In the end, what is very important is to ensure benefits are available for workers who are injured at work. At the same time, this must be done responsibly to ensure rates paid by employers are affordable. The sustainability of the Accident Fund must also be ensured. This is a complex file, and we do not need to politicize it.

[*Original*]

Mr. Oliver: When the minister discussed this huge rate increase with WorkSafeNB board members, I am sure that they would have been prepared with lots of background information. I am equally sure that they would have come to the table with some recommendations for the minister to consider.

One area of concern that we have learned through the media was the decrease in the investment income. Of course, we all know that investment returns fluctuate. However, it appears that the rate increase was based on one year of poor results. I understand that forecasting indicated that a rate increase was necessary, but was such a large rate increase necessary without a three- to five-year trend established? In fact, if you look at 2008, when we had one of the worst investment losses, there was very little rate adjustment. Did the board make any recommendations about controlling costs, and will the minister share with us any and all recommendations that the board made to control these costs and rates?



Hon. Mr. Arseneault: Again, it is ironic, coming from the opposition members. They are part of the problem. They are the people who created this problem as well. When they did the internal review back in 2013, under the former government and the former minister, they brought forward a three-phased approach. When they introduced legislation, it had a tremendous impact on the operations of WorkSafeNB. Today, WorkSafeNB is feeling an impact of some of the unintended consequences, to the tune of over \$40 million. They were part of that government. The member who is asking the question was part of the board that knew everything that is happening today.

You have a member of the opposition introducing legislation to increase PTSD. I believe in that. The more insured benefits that we can have for injured workers... I believe in that. However, we also have to realize that when you increase the benefits, there is an impact on rates. It is pretty low, coming from the members opposite, when they are part of the problem and they are trying to blame the government for this. I do believe that there is no...

Mr. Speaker: Time, minister.

Mr. Oliver: It is the mandate of WorkSafeNB to represent stakeholders and provide recommendations and advice to government with respect to legislation. Have there been any such recommendations to the Gallant government in light of these huge increases, which add to the financial burden of those who create jobs in New Brunswick? Has WorkSafeNB approached government with any advice regarding legislation that might lighten the strain that these huge increases put on our fragile economy? Most importantly, is the minister prepared to make changes to the Act to protect both our workers and our employers?

The Premier constantly quotes job numbers, and, given the press lately, our concern on this side of the House is what effect this will have on job numbers. Just recently, we read that one company is reconsidering its plan to move its headquarters to New Brunswick. This is not the message that we need to send to the employers of this province. Could the minister please comment on that?

Hon. Mr. Arseneault: I do not know where the member opposite has been over the last several weeks. I have made changes. I have brought forward Bill 15, which is going to make a number of changes that are going to correct the unintended consequences that the former government brought forward.

I did meet with the board. I met with it earlier this year. We discussed many issues and the concerns that it had. I did have an echo of a potential rate increase of that magnitude. It was said that it was not going to happen. Unfortunately, it did, and I am very disappointed. I said that publicly. I met not only with WorkSafeNB but also with the Appeals Tribunal. I met with the



board of WorkSafeNB. Do you know what we did as a government? We introduced changes. That is Bill 15. I hope that we will have the support of the opposition.

Again, this is a very complex issue. It is one that is very important to New Brunswickers and very important to injured workers. I want to make sure that we have the best benefits for them and that they can get access to the benefits in a timely manner. That is what we are trying to do with the best affordable rates, and we still have some of the lowest rates in the country.

Snow Removal

Mr. Jeff Carr: I have a few brief questions for the Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure. Last week, we experienced our first major winter storm here in central and southern New Brunswick. Work in many of the subdivisions, or in all the subdivisions, in many ridings in the capital region is tendered out. It is contracted out to private contractors. This is not something new. This is a process that has been happening for several years. This year, those contracts have not been fulfilled, and the obligations in those tenders were not fulfilled in this first storm.

It was several hours after the storm even finished before the first piece of equipment actually made it to these subdivisions. These delays drag the economy down a long way. Our first responders cannot get to the emergencies. I am just wondering whether the minister can tell us today what actions he has taken so far to go back into the department to see that this does not happen again.

Hon. Mr. Fraser: I want to thank the member opposite for the question. It is a very important question. Obviously, we are into the winter season. Safety is always our number one priority at the Department of Transportation and Infrastructure, to ensure that our roads and our bridges—our transportation system—are safe and reliable for the travelling public.

There were some issues during the first storm. In fact, I spent an hour and a half at the switchboard taking calls from residents across the province. I heard firsthand about some of the problems that happened in certain regions. I am very much aware of them. I spoke with all the district engineers throughout the province. They are certainly looking into the situation, and they will ensure that they work diligently with each of the contractors who were awarded the contracts to do plowing in these various regions around the province, to ensure that they are living up to their responsibility according to the contracts that they were given.

Thank you for the question. We are on top of it. We are going to continue to work through the district engineers who are responsible for maintaining the roads.

Mr. Jeff Carr: Thank you for the answer. This is what I really would like to know. Inside these contracts, there are penalties for contractors. There are obligations for contractors to present



to the department, to the government, the levels of insurance that they have and lists of equipment that they will have available, and this has to be done on certain dates. If it is displayed that some of these provisions are not met, such as the equipment that is readily available to clear our roads for our first responders, for our doctors and nurses to get to their jobs, and for our most valuable cargo—our students and their educators—to get to their schools, then there are penalties in place for this. They are very strict penalties, and they have to be upheld.

I want to know today whether the minister will look into this and make sure that those penalties are enforced so that this does not happen again to our rural New Brunswickers.

Mr. Speaker: Time.

Hon. Mr. Fraser: The Department of Transportation and Infrastructure is responsible for 22 847 km of roads in the province, 3 226 bridges, and 3 057 large culverts as well as over 235 000 smaller culverts. We have a huge responsibility. Now, we are into the winter maintenance program. We do not take these concerns lightly. That is why I personally spent an hour and a half taking calls from New Brunswickers on the day of the first storm. I heard firsthand some of the concerns that were raised.

I want to commend the staff at the Department of Transportation and Infrastructure who work extremely hard to ensure the safety of New Brunswickers and of people travelling throughout our province. Again, in terms of contracts that have been awarded, the contractors have to live up to the standards of those contracts. Our department is going to ensure, through the district engineers, that it is done.

Mr. Jeff Carr: I can appreciate that the minister takes this seriously. However, I want to ensure that the minister is sending the message down to the people who are responsible for looking after this that it is serious for the taxpayers of New Brunswick. People in these subdivisions pay the same taxes as the people who live on Class A roads. There is a policy in place, a minimum standard policy for snow removal on these roads, and it needs to be upheld.

It would be really helpful if the minister would put together a meeting of the district staff, the contractors responsible, and the MLAs who are affected by this and who represent the areas that were missed on this. Would the minister take me up on that offer and invite us all to a meeting with district staff and the contractors involved so that we can share our issues and our complaints and see how we can move this forward so that everybody gets the timely service that is awarded to them, that is offered to them, and that they expect to receive?

Hon. Mr. Fraser: That is a bit of a unique strategy from the member opposite. The meeting has already been held. We have met with the engineers around the province. The engineers have



already had meetings with the contractors where some situations arose. I find it rather unique that, if the member opposite was really concerned about what was going on, he should have reached out to me, called the department, or called the local engineer, just like the New Brunswickers who called me when I was taking calls at the switchboard during the first snowfall earlier this week, rather than standing up in the Legislature and trying to score political points.

Again, I want to reiterate that I am very proud of the entire team, over 1 700 employees at the Department of Transportation and Infrastructure who work extremely hard. I find it a little bit unique how the member is approaching this rather than reaching out to his local engineer. He has the number. If he does not, I will send it to him.

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker: Order.

Hon. Mr. Fraser: They are there to work for all New Brunswickers. Thank you.

