

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions



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[Translation]

EDUCATION / ÉDUCATION

Mr. Savoie (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Good afternoon to you.

[Original]

Before beginning, on behalf of His Majesty's loyal opposition, I would certainly like to welcome King Charles and Queen Camilla to Canada.

Now, I would like to turn to more pressing matters here in the province, Madam Speaker. That is the matter of what this government is doing to impact the education system. This government is getting a failing grade, particularly in education. The government said that its cuts were not going to impact classrooms. We see that its cuts are impacting classrooms. They are impacting children and their learning on a permanent basis. This is a serious matter. In her state of the province address, the Premier said that she was going to use data-driven and fact-based decision making. Can the Premier or the minister please tell me what data they used to come up with the \$43 million in cuts? Thank you.

Hon. C. Johnson (Moncton South, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, L): Madam Speaker, thank you to the Leader of the Opposition for the opportunity to share our vision for education. We've heard from teachers. We've heard from parents. We've heard that under-resourced classrooms have been a problem for a while now. This didn't happen overnight. It's been around six years. Yes, something like that. We've seen a decline in literacy rates and numeracy rates.

Right now, in collaboration with districts and with partners, we're looking at how we can make sure that the resources being invested in education are in the classrooms and around the students. That is where they are needed. The evidence shows us that the resources need to be close to the students so that we can get moving on increasing literacy rates and numeracy rates and reducing chronic absenteeism.

Mr. Savoie (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. The minister did not answer the question—not even close. I asked what data she and the Premier used to inform their decision to make \$43 million in cuts to the districts. Now she's getting up and saying: Well, you know, we want to make sure that this is spending in the classroom. They asked the districts to cut \$43 million, and now it's impacting classrooms. I think it is a legitimate question to ask the government this: What data did you use? Or are these just talking points? Are the minister and Premier using talking points to just say: We're going to talk about dealing with teachers and working with students and not impacting classrooms. Or did they really look at the data and know exactly where the districts had to make the cuts? This is what we want to know.

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The minister and the Premier said they were driven by data. They said they would be transparent. They said they would communicate. They are failing on all these points. I want to know this: What data did they use to make these cuts? Thank you.

Hon. C. Johnson (Moncton South, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, L): Madam Speaker, thank you for the opportunity to talk about our process. We took last year's budget and we added \$200 million more. That's what we did. We invested. We invested in the education system. That came with our vision. That came with our overarching ideas on how we want to stabilize classrooms, increase literacy rates, increase numeracy rates, and reduce chronic absenteeism. Those are our targets. That is what we want to be held accountable for.

To do that, we invested more than last year—\$200 million more than the previous government. Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Mr. Savoie (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): Thank you, Madam Speaker. The disappointing thing is that this minister actually believes the rhetoric that her communications crew put together for her. This is awful. This is exactly what we talked about in our member statement about spending more money and getting negative results.

The minister talked about putting more resources closer to the students. Well, let's talk about the instructional budget, which the government cut by 40%. It cut it by 40%. This exactly impacts the classroom. That budget is for photocopies. It's for books. It's for gym supplies. It's for chemicals. It's for paper. It's for all these things.

If you want to talk about the \$200 million, that increased the salaries of teachers and EAs, which was well merited. However, you have taken away the tools they need to be able to do their jobs. What was the data? How did the government members decide they were going to push these kinds of cuts onto these districts? Can they defend these cuts? That's what I want to hear from this minister. I want to hear her take responsibility because this government is not taking responsibility. Take—

Hon. C. Johnson (Moncton South, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker.

[Translation]

Thank you, Madam Speaker. Thank you, again, for giving me the opportunity to talk about the investments our government is making in the education sector. More specifically, they amount to \$200 million more than last year. In addition, they are targeted investments. They ensure that students benefit directly from the resources.

Our government has targeted investments in student support, educational assistants, and educational support staff who will teach our young people to read and write. If young

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people learn to read and write in our schools, guess what happens? They want to go to school. When they want to go to school, the rate of chronic absenteeism goes down. That is what our government wants to do by investing in the education sector and aiming at very, very specific targets.

[*Original*]

Mr. Savoie (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. It is very clear that this Minister of Education is not listening to teachers. We know the government has made cuts to ISD and child and youth mental health supports. In one educational area alone, we know that there are 400 children—400 kids—who rely on these mental health supports. These children build relationships with the people who work with them and help them with their social issues, whatever form they come in. Now, these positions are being cut, and there is a fear within the system that these kids could get into drugs, crime, self-harm. This is all being caused by the decisions of this government. Does this minister defend the cuts the government is forcing districts to make to these supports that children need? Is she going to defend this? Is she going to stand up and tell this House and New Brunswickers that she feels it is okay to cut these mental health supports? I'd like to hear from the minister. Thank you.

Hon. C. Johnson (Moncton South, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, L): Madam Speaker, thank you to the member opposite, the Leader of the Official Opposition, for the opportunity to share what I have been hearing from teachers. We have been consulting with teachers since the beginning of our campaign. We've knocked on so many doors, and we've heard directly from teachers. What they want is stable classrooms. Stabilizing classrooms takes resources at the classroom level and at the school level. That's exactly what we're providing by investing \$200 million more in education than last year. We have set out to work collaboratively with the districts to meet our goals and get resources back into the classroom so that we can increase numeracy and literacy rates and decrease chronic absenteeism.

In addition, we know that student well-being is a challenge. We know that they also need extra support at the classroom level. We are—

Mr. Savoie (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): Well, again, talking points are failing points, Madam Speaker. We asked very clearly where these cuts are taking place. I'll ask the minister something she can perhaps answer rather than give talking points. How much of that \$200 million is due to salary increases?

Hon. C. Johnson (Moncton South, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker. That \$200 million is the amount that we're investing in education this year. That's \$200 million more than last year. Do you know what? Part of that is going to go to teachers' salaries, of course. That's because we value retention first. Part of that retention is making sure that our teachers have competitive wages. It's so important. So, we're thrilled that part of our investment, our \$200 million, is going to go

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toward teachers' salaries. That's terrific because we value teachers, and we value their work. We want to keep teachers here in the province. That's great work. We're thrilled about that. When we have teachers who have the resources they need, starting with their salaries, then they are going to be able to teach—

Mr. Savoie (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. This was a mandatory increase, so this has nothing to do with this government. It's about 50%. About half of it was a mandatory increase. However, the government has actually managed to take away resources, Madam Speaker. Government has poorly managed this file. Government has not talked to teachers. There are cuts to mental health care. There are cuts to instructional dollars. There is no improvement. There are cuts to the number of librarians. There is not going to be an improvement in the classroom. The government is permanently impacting the classroom. This is impacting these kids in a permanent way.

The Premier has said: Well, all budgets... They didn't know that budgets are negotiable. Well, I will tell you, a budget, by definition, is a plan, and this government has no plan. So, I would like to hear this from the minister: Is she going to go back and negotiate with these districts? Are they going to get all of the money, all of the \$43 million? What's going to happen because nobody seems—

Hon. C. Johnson (Moncton South, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Thank you for the opportunity to talk about our vision once again. We are a government that wants to collaborate. We want to collaborate with all our partners. In Education, one of our main partners is the districts. We are in collaboration with them. We are in constant communication with them on how we can do things differently. Why do we need to do things differently? Well, for the past few years, we've seen a decline in literacy and numeracy rates, and chronic absenteeism has been on the rise. We need to do things differently. Part of that is change. That's not always an easy thing to do, but we are collaborating with the districts. We are looking at how to invest in the best way possible to be able to support our students in—

Mr. Lee (Fundy-The Isles-Saint John Lorneville, PC): Thank you, Madam Speaker. In an article published by Global News on May 23, the headline said this: "N.B. education minister says more school funding could be in the cards".

Well, where's that coming from? Didn't the government expect that, in order for the districts to make up the millions of dollars they are being mandated to cut, the money would have to come from multiple places, not only administrative and bureaucratic things? The minister doesn't like the word "cut" and prefers "redirect", "rethink", and "reinvest". However, in this very article, she says "cut" multiple times: "multiple districts have announced staffing cuts", "cuts were not what she had in mind when the provincial government asked districts to "redirect" \$43 million", "We were hoping that it was going to

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be cuts at the district level”, and—the coup de grâce—“what we wanted with this exercise was to redirect resource[s] back into the classrooms and back into the schools”.

My question to the honourable Minister of Education is this: Was this whole district budget talk merely an exercise to see how the districts would respond? If it was, then there was a lot of collateral damage done to people.

Hon. C. Johnson (Moncton South, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker. We value our relationships—our collaborative relationships—with the districts. In doing this, yes, we’ve asked them to do a hard exercise. We’ve asked them to look at how they’re spending investments in education. We want to make sure that, when we invest in education, we’re getting the desired outcomes.

That’s a hard exercise. In collaboration with them and in support of them, we’ve invested in the education system. We want to see how that’s going to be used at the district level. That’s the exercise that has been happening over the past few weeks, and it’s been a really good one.

We’ve been collaborating with the districts. They’re surprised. They’ve been a little bit surprised that they’re working with a government that’s actually open to what they have to say. In reaction to what they have to say, we may readjust—

Mr. Lee (Fundy-The Isles-Saint John Lorneville, PC): Thank you, Madam Speaker. In an article dated May 26, districts have continued to weigh in with their information: “this year, (the education department) provided ASD-S our budget allocation and informed us of the need to find savings of approximately \$9.3 million.” The ASD-S superintendent further elaborated that “with little leeway in our expenses, such a significant reduction will inevitably impact staffing and programs.”

A spokesperson for the Francophone sud school district stated that “historically, budget-related matters have been presented to us as final directives—not as proposals open to negotiation.” Anglophone North School District said that its \$3.8 million reduction originally came directly from the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development and that “the instruction was communicated as a firm target”.

Knowing that budget changes for the districts were impending, did the minister realize and have the foresight at that point to recognize that there would be untold ramifications of such mandates?

Hon. C. Johnson (Moncton South, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Our government’s priority is to collaborate with our partners in an open and transparent way. What’s interesting, though, is that we’re seeing that they’re not used to that. We almost have to relearn what a collaborative, open, productive relationship looks like. They’re used to having someone with a heavy hand come to them and say: You will do this. There was no collaboration. So now, when we’re

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looking to collaborate with them, it's interesting and we have to relearn how to work together. We almost have to deal with a trauma response as we fix a relationship that has been broken. Right now, we are collaborating with them. Do you know what? We are fiscally responsible as well. We are looking to be as efficient as we possibly can be with our investments.

Mr. Lee (Fundy-The Isles-Saint John Lorneville, PC): Thank you, Madam Speaker. According to the article yesterday, May 26, districts "should have known they could negotiate their budgets and didn't need to rush to cut jobs to find \$43 million the government was looking for". According to the Premier, her government is still learning how to avoid being "an inflexible brick wall" when budgets are being set. Are we talking about the education sector specifically or budgets and deficits in general? Regardless, the mandated cuts to the education sector, contrary to the Premier's comments, are, as the band Pink Floyd so aptly says: "All in all, it's just another brick in the wall".

The onus is on the government to communicate its plans and not to say that it is the districts' responsibility and that they should know that. Blame that on the system, previous leadership styles, lack of communication, and habits. Well, who is in the leadership now? Who gave the directive for the cuts? If the school districts of New Brunswick had not gone public with their cost-cutting plans, would this recent frame of mind, approach, and attempt to correct a massive blunder be taking place?

Hon. C. Johnson (Moncton South, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker, and thank you for the opportunity to talk about how change in culture takes time. It takes time to work with our partners in an open, collaborative, transparent way. That's what we're doing right now. We've come to them with an important investment in education, and we've asked them to do the hard work of making sure that those investments get the desired outcome. That's the work that's being done right now.

Now, part of this happened in the media, in the public eye. Why? Because we want to be open and transparent. We don't mind that New Brunswickers are aware of exactly how we're collaborating with the districts. We want to collaborate in an open, transparent way. That has always been a priority for this government. That's what it looks like. It might be surprising for some people in the room because it's the first time they have seen what open collaboration looks like.

NB LIQUOR / ALCOOL NB

Ms. Bockus (Saint Croix, PC): Thank you, Madam Speaker. New Brunswickers are watching the Holt government sit on \$4 million in American liquor while, at the same time, cutting funding to the food banks by \$1 million. CTV News has a survey on its website asking Maritimers whether we should dump the U.S. liquor cheaply, put it back on shelves, or

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continue to keep it in a warehouse. When I checked, there was about one third in agreement with continuing to keep it in the warehouse.

I got one email very much in favour of the minister's position while attacking me personally. I have shared the email with the minister, but I'm unable to read it in the House without setting some sort of world record for unparliamentary language.

To the minister, through you, Madam Speaker, has the government's position changed? Or will we continue to warehouse this liquor? Is it still worth \$4 million? Thank you.

Hon. Mr. Randall (Fredericton North, Minister responsible for Opportunities NB; Minister responsible for Economic Development and Small Business; Minister responsible for NB Liquor and Cannabis NB, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Thank you to the member opposite for the question. I want to talk about the relationships that we have in this House. All these voices in the House represent people in the province. It is important that New Brunswickers understand that we are here representing their voices. Sometimes, there are differences of opinion, but there is a great deal of respect that we show each other in this House. We certainly attempt to represent the voices. I want to just speak on the member opposite's email. I share her concern, and I look forward to many years of working with the member opposite in the House.

To her question, as I said last week on multiple occasions, that liquor is being sold by our channel partners. It is being sold through. We aren't purchasing more U.S. alcohol. We'll continue to work with our channel partners across this beautiful province to be able to sell that liquor and make good on the investment that ANBL has made.

Ms. Bockus (Saint Croix, PC): Thank you, Madam Speaker. I just have one question. I guess I'm a little bit confused. You can laugh if you like. If the liquor is being sold through channel partners, why isn't it being sold in ANBL stores? Is it still worth \$4 million? Thank you.

Hon. Mr. Randall (Fredericton North, Minister responsible for Opportunities NB; Minister responsible for Economic Development and Small Business; Minister responsible for NB Liquor and Cannabis NB, L): I thank the member opposite for the question. This was a decision that we made, at the time of the announcement, to actually pull the alcohol off the shelves. We have looked at that investment. We understand that the people of New Brunswick want us to make sure that we're providing dollars for education, dollars for health care, and dollars for the priorities of the people of New Brunswick.

Based on the feedback from our channel partners, the beautiful independent businesses that the opposition and the member opposite have asked me to support, we made the decision to step in and support those New Brunswick small businesses that deliver services to this beautiful province in partnership with ANBL. It was a decision made knowing that these small businesses are having to adapt to the significant product changes being made and the changes in supply chains. This helps those businesses adapt by giving them more time and the benefit of that inventory that's in our warehouse. Thank you, Madam Speaker.

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ENVIRONMENT / ENVIRONNEMENT

Ms. Mitton (Tantramar, G): Madam Speaker, last week, documents released by the CBC under a right to information request unveiled that Irving Oil was unaware of diesel leaking out of its underground storage tank at the Woodstock Irving until after it was discovered that at least 180 000 litres of diesel had leaked in December. This brings into question how well the Department of Environment has been enforcing the *Petroleum Product Storage and Handling Regulation* under the *Clean Environment Act*. These regulations require all licensees to report monitoring data to the minister weekly. That this spill may have gone undetected for weeks looks like a complete failure of the Department of Environment to enforce its regulations. When was the last time the department received a report on fuel levels in the storage tanks at Murray's Irving prior to the fuel leak?

[Translation]

Hon. Mr. LePage (Restigouche West, Minister of Environment and Climate Change; Minister responsible for the Regional Development Corporation, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker. I think that the priority in this file is the safety of people in the affected region.

This is an error or event that happened at a gas station. All gas stations must have their equipment inspected annually, which leads to the production of reports. The inspection is based on the regulations of our department. From our understanding so far, this is an accident that wasn't caused by an individual or any kind of breach. The breakage happened, and we reacted accordingly.

When we receive the report explaining how the breakage happened, what is faulty, and what more we could have done, we will take the necessary measures. However, I can tell you that this is an isolated event and that we will act to protect the environment and the people in the affected region. Thank you.

[Original]

Ms. Mitton (Tantramar, G): Madam Speaker, it doesn't appear that a failure to enforce regulations by the Department of Environment is an isolated event. The CBC story also reported that out of the 30 gas stations that had tanks inspected as part of the recent rounds of inspection, seven were issued tickets for operating a storage tank without a valid license. Section 18 of the *Petroleum Product Storage and Handling Regulation* under the *Clean Environment Act* says that no person shall fill a petroleum storage tank unless they have been shown a valid license. This would seem to be another clear example of the Department of Environment failing to enforce its regulations. What is the minister going to do to ensure that his department has the capacity to actually enforce the environmental laws that we have in place?

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[Translation]

Hon. Mr. LePage (Restigouche West, Minister of Environment and Climate Change; Minister responsible for the Regional Development Corporation, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker. I hope I'm not being offensive, but you must understand that we have a limited number of inspectors in the province and that they have a role and responsibility. They must respect our Acts and regulations.

Retailers also have the same responsibility. They are businesspeople who must protect their environment. If they want to continue operating their businesses, they have no other choice but to respect the Acts and regulations.

We are working in partnership. I can assure you that our Acts are in effect to protect the environment and New Brunswickers. However, incidents can happen, and we must react. That is exactly what we did in the case of the gas station in Woodstock. We managed to determine that it was necessary to crack down a little bit more. We made other... The incidents that the member opposite is bringing up are...

[Original]

SERVICE DELIVERY / PRESTATION DE SERVICES

Ms. M. Johnson (Carleton-Victoria, PC): Thank you, Madam Speaker. You and I are of an age to remember what reruns are. We've seen this movie before. Every time there's a looming postal strike, vulnerable New Brunswickers, seniors, people with disabilities, and low-income families are left wondering how they're going to receive their vital income supports. Given that we've faced postal disruptions before, why has the department not implemented a permanent contingency plan for all clients to ensure that their financial security is never again held hostage by mail delays? Also, it feels a little like déjà vu because the government keeps reacting instead of preparing. Other provinces have already adapted. Why does New Brunswick keep lagging behind? Is this a matter of outdated systems or a failure to prioritize those most at risk?

Hon. Ms. Miles (Hanwell-New Maryland, Minister of Social Development; Minister responsible for the Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation, L): Madam Speaker, through you to the member opposite, let me be clear: It's not a failure to recognize that these folks need these cheques in their hands.

Right now, as we've done in the past, we've ensured that case managers and case workers are in contact with all the folks who are being supported and need these cheques in their hands. We are in constant contact with folks. Case managers and case workers work with folks. The percentage of folks who receive payments by direct deposit right now is about 87%. That went up a bit from last time. We're really encouraging folks to utilize that option if it's available to them and something they want to do. If it's not something they want to

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do, we're doing our absolute very best to meet them where they are. I will take this observation or question from the member opposite under advisement: Is there something we could be doing more proactively? I'm going to go back to my team and see what that could look like, so thank you very much.

Ms. M. Johnson (Carleton-Victoria, PC): Thank you, Madam Speaker. The minister has said that clients are encouraged to sign up for direct deposit, but encouragement doesn't help somebody who lacks Internet access or stable banking relationships.

What concrete steps has the department taken to actively transition clients off paper cheques, particularly those clients in rural, low-income areas, before a disruption occurs?

With all due respect, if other provinces have already modernized their systems to avoid cheque disruption, what's stopping New Brunswick from doing the same? Is this a matter of political will, outdated systems, or a lack of urgency?

Hon. Ms. Miles (Hanwell-New Maryland, Minister of Social Development; Minister responsible for the Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation, L): Madam Speaker, through you to the member opposite, there were a lot of questions in there, but I think I can answer them with one answer. The priority is getting these cheques into the hands of the people who need them the most. You're right. The internet is not the same for everybody. Not everybody can access it, nor should people be forced to if it's not something they want to do. That's why we have our team on the ground, working with folks to ensure that we know where they are and are meeting them where they are to get those cheques into their hands.

As I said earlier, I'll take this under advisement, go back to our team, and see whether there is a way we can be more proactive. I go back to encouraging everybody in this House to share the 211 NB service with those we have contact with and the folks who reach out to us in our MLA constituencies. If you can support people with that, that's great. It's another connection to community for folks. Thank you very much.

[Translation]

Madam Speaker (Hon. Ms. Landry): Question period is over.