

# Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

## Oral Questions



**May 28, 2025**

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[Translation]

### EDUCATION

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

[Original]

I'm not going to promise anything, but I'll do my best. I think that's all you can ask of us, but I'll tell you, Madam Speaker, we won't be silenced by any legislative maneuvers caused by the Government House Leader. No. However, we will continue to talk about the saga of uncertainty that has been caused by this Premier and this Education Minister.

Yesterday, through the media, we found out... Even though I asked the minister those questions in this House, questions about more money being available, the minister wouldn't answer. So she doesn't want to give answers to the people of this province through the House that she was elected to, but she will run out to the media and do it. Even then, the minister wasn't very certain, Madam Speaker. She was saying, well, I don't know exactly how much. Budgets were made, decisions were made, and people's jobs got cut because of the decisions of this government. So I'm going to ask the minister directly, and maybe she will answer this: How much? If she can't say how much, that tells me that she doesn't actually have a plan. Thank you, Madam Speaker.

**Hon. C. Johnson** (Moncton South, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker. I'm going to try to explain a concept that may be foreign to the members on the other side of the House. When we collaborate with people, we don't come in with a solution. We come in with an open mind and an open heart. That's why we don't know the answer coming in. That's what collaboration looks like. That's what's happening right now. We are working with the districts right now to find somewhere in the middle, to have no impact in the classroom, as that is what we have committed to.

We want to improve literacy rates, improve numeracy rates, reduce chronic absenteeism, and have no impact on the classroom, and we are working toward that goal.

**Mr. Savoie** (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): Well, I didn't hear a number in there, Madam Speaker, so maybe the minister will run out to the media and tell them the exact number once the Premier tells her the number she can give. She is impacting the classroom, and she's taking away tools from teachers. I have asked this point-blank: What is your plan? What is the number? She can't give it, or she won't, showing great disrespect to this House. But I will ask. I will ask, Madam Speaker.

(Interjections.)

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**Mr. Savoie** (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): Oh, I can have the opinion that she is showing disrespect to the House, Madam Speaker. That is my opinion. At the end of the day, my question to the minister is this—

(Interjections.)

**Madam Speaker** (Hon. Ms. Landry): Members, I will ask the Leader of the Official Opposition to please start his question again.

(Interjections.)

**Madam Speaker** (Hon. Ms. Landry): We will reset the clock to zero. Start again, without the word “disrespect”.

**Mr. Savoie** (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): Okay, Madam Speaker. Because of my respect for you, I will do my best again.

The government members have clearly shown that they don't have a plan, Madam Speaker, and that they would rather run out to the media than explain what they are doing here in the House. I find that unacceptable, and the people of New Brunswick should find it unacceptable.

What I asked for was a number. The minister couldn't give it to me. Here is what I will ask this time. If you are saying that you magically have more money available than you had when you forced districts to make these budget decisions, are you now going to have strings attached? Are you going to force them to spend the money where you tell them to spend it? Are they going to rehire people who have lost their jobs? Can the districts get those people back? I'd like some details from this minister. What is her plan with the money that she's now going to give? She can't give us a dollar amount. What is her plan? Are there strings attached? Will the districts be forced to spend that money in a certain way?

**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 we're going to land on a number, how we're going to land somewhere in the middle. We had the ask, and then we made an offer. Then the districts did the hard work of assessing how they're investing dollars in education. That's an important exercise, because we need to make sure that every dollar invested in education is actually getting the desired outcomes in numeracy, literacy, and chronic absenteeism. Those are our priorities.

Now, we are working in collaboration, and we are going to land somewhere, somewhere fair and equitable, between those two numbers. That's going to happen. Landing on a number at this minute would show narrow vision, because there are many, many variables that determine what that actual number is going to be. We will get a number eventually. That will happen.

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**Mr. Savoie** (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): A budget is a plan, Madam Speaker. A budget is a plan, and that plan is what the districts had to follow based on the dollars they were given. This minister is showing every time she gets on her feet that she doesn't know the impact of what she is doing to the system. A budget is set. The districts set employment numbers. They set a certain number of employees in each school based on the money they have.

They need time to be able to do that. The government has introduced chaos, and now government members are flip-flopping on this and saying: Well, we're going to give more money, but we're not going to say how much.

I'm trying to help give certainty back to the districts. Is the government going to reach into districts and tell them where they need to spend this money? What are they going to do? They have to have a plan. The minister gets up and says: It's fluid and it's evolving. No, they should have had this information weeks ago. The government is going to force them to work into the summer. What is their plan?

**Hon. C. Johnson** (Moncton South, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Thank you for the opportunity to clearly explain that our government knows exactly what it's doing. The government is encouraging transformational change. That is what we are doing—culture change and transformational change. We are looking at how we actually increase literacy and numeracy and reduce chronic absenteeism, because those numbers had been in sharp decline for years before we had the privilege of doing what we're doing now. We know exactly what we're doing.

Once again, in contrast to the other side of the House, we are not imposing our solutions. We are working in collaboration with the districts. That takes a little bit of time. We will absolutely land somewhere, but it will take a little bit longer because we're actually working with our partners in a meaningful, transparent way.

**Mr. Savoie** (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): The minister is not working in a meaningful, transparent way because obviously the departments didn't know that budgets were negotiable. The government forced these cuts on these districts. Now the districts are saying: We've had to shrink our workforce to be able to accommodate that. Now the government is flip-flopping and saying: Well, now you magically have more money.

Let me see if I can take the minister into a little deeper water here. The government members have said that they want to move teachers back into the classroom but that there are positions that are unnecessary in the districts. I would like to know: Who is going to replace these people who have worked to build up their skill sets to do the jobs that they are doing in the districts? What is the government's plan to replace them once they move these teachers back into the classroom? Are the jobs deleted? Are they cut? Are the districts going to replace them? Are they going to retrain people to fill these positions? What is the



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government's plan? They don't have a budget. They don't have a plan for a budget but maybe they have a plan for this. Maybe the minister can share that.

**Hon. C. Johnson** (Moncton South, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker. We are stabilizing the classrooms. We have consulted with teachers. We have heard from parents who are concerned about student performance and outcomes. They have told us, again and again and again—and even some of the members opposite agree with me—that the resources need to be at the classroom level. That's exactly what we're doing. We're doing this in a fiscally responsible way. We need to make changes. We need to readjust, and we need to focus our resources exactly where they need to be. They need to be focused on students, providing that direct support so that we can finally see an increase in literacy rates and numeracy rates and a reduction in chronic absenteeism.

**Mr. Monahan** (Arcadia-Butternut Valley-Maple Hills, PC): New Brunswickers were assured that education would remain a priority in this year's provincial budget, yet today we are witnessing the opposite. School districts across the province are being forced to cut vital support staff, including library workers, aides, and others who play an essential role in creating a safe, inclusive, and effective learning environment for our children.

We've now learned that \$43 million is being redirected from district budgets, not from travel or administrative expenses, as the minister originally intended, but from the very classrooms we claim to protect. The language may be carefully chosen, but the reality is clear to students, families, and educators. These are cuts, plain and simple. The minister said more funding might be in the cards, but our schools deserve more than vague reassurances. They deserve action. My question to the government is this: Do you intend to blow past the budgeted amount for education set out in your March 18 budget speech to repair the damage these so-called redirections have caused?

**L'hon. M. Legacy** (Bathurst, Deputy Premier; Minister of Finance and Treasury Board; Minister responsible for Energy; Minister responsible for the *Right to Information and Protection of Privacy Act*, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Well, we've had a lot of talk about the budget and numbers, so here are a couple of numbers for the opposition.

When we started the budget process, the request from the Department of Education was for a 15.8% increase. That is unsustainable—15.8% increase. That's how much. It equated to about a \$302-million increase. We pushed to get that budget to \$200 million, knowing full well that we were going to get criticized for going into a deficit position. The department came back and said: Listen, we can work with about \$250 million, but we need to talk to our partners to find the last \$50 million. We need to find solutions. Now, they have come back and said: Listen, there are places where we can make some transformational changes, but the timeline needs to be a little bit longer. We are looking for a specific number. Budgets are negotiated not just on numbers. There are timelines, and

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there are blank paths. That's a whole different story from just citing a simple number like that.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Monahan** (Arcadia-Butternut Valley-Maple Hills, PC): If the government says its goal was to redirect funding to better support students in the classroom, why are school districts left with no other viable choice than to cut the very positions that support students the most directly? This may be a communication problem or a lack of foresight. This comes down to a weakness in planning and a gap between policy and reality on the ground.

Our Premier has recognized that her government is still at the learning stage, as she said herself. The government acted like an inflexible brick wall while preparing the budget. The government's admission offers little comfort to the teachers and students who are already feeling the effects of these decisions. So, I'm asking the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development this question directly. How can this government justify asking districts to revise budgets without first providing them with the necessary tools, flexibility, and resources to protect front-line staff?

**Hon. Mr. Legacy** (Bathurst, Deputy Premier; Minister of Finance and Treasury Board; Minister responsible for Energy; Minister responsible for the *Right to Information and Protection of Privacy Act*, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker. I thank the member opposite for his question. He mentioned being at the learning stage, but corrections are being made, too. During the budgeting process, the education sector requested a 15.8% increase, the health care sector requested a 13.6% increase, and the social development sector requested a 12.2% increase. That is 63% of our budget, which is an increase of over 10%. This is an unsustainable situation. We can't continue down the same path. We can't afford to do so.

For six years, the previous government chose to ignore the problem, which worsened. The previous government did nothing and chose instead to hide behind money transfers from the federal government. The previous government did nothing. So, we are in correction mode, and it's true that it's difficult. This situation is extremely difficult for everyone, but we have no choice. It is necessary to move forward and to proceed in this way. Discussions need to take place, and, unfortunately, opting for transparency brings irrational criticism regarding several of our government's decisions. However, we have no choice, and discussions must continue.

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[Original]

### HIRING

**Mr. Hogan** (Woodstock-Hartland, PC): Madam Speaker, in the Holt government universe, there are no cuts and no hiring freezes. In the real universe, people whose lives have been impacted don't care much about what the Holt government calls cuts and hiring freezes. They just know that they've had their lives impacted in a negative way.

In Education, the Holt government ordered school districts to cut \$43 million. In Health, the Holt government has done the same to Horizon to the tune of \$50 million. We've been learning about the unintended consequences of these cuts in education, and we're waiting to learn about the unintended consequences of the "not freeze" in hiring in Health. Will the Minister of Health please tell this House how many people will not be hired during this hiring pause, and is there a target number?

**Hon. Mr. Dornan** (Saint John Portland-Simonds, Minister of Health, L): Madam Speaker, to the member opposite, it's a difficult rhetorical question: How many people will not be hired? Is it a million?

Our CEO of Horizon is taking the reasonable approach of looking at what is needed going forward. What opportunities will there be to have some activities absorbed by other people without necessarily hiring new people? That's a prudent fiscal decision. So, no, I cannot tell you how many people will not be hired, but I do commend our CEO for looking at opportunities to put people in the jobs that they are able to do without letting people move to other areas. No, I can't tell you how many people are not being hired.

There is a freeze on nonclinical, administrative, hires at this point in time. We continue to hire in the clinical area, where we are putting people on the front line. Thank you.

**Mr. Hogan** (Woodstock-Hartland, PC): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Most New Brunswickers have had the experience of speaking with an administrative professional first when they visit the hospital. We have to wonder whether these positions that are not being filled are the types that would be the first stop on our health care journey in our hospitals. In education, the Holt government cut the librarians out of the schools. I'm left wondering what is being cut in the way of health care services with the health care hiring pause. The President and CEO of Horizon stated that the Holt government has directed Horizon Health to cut \$50 million in expenses. Based on what we learned in education, can the Health Minister tell New Brunswickers whether the \$50 million is negotiable? Does the minister have authority to dicker with the CEO of Horizon?

**Hon. Mr. Dornan** (Saint John Portland-Simonds, Minister of Health, L): Madam Speaker, to the member opposite, yes, we live in a difficult fiscal environment. We are looking for opportunities where some of our services could be adjusted. For example, there could be a



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reduction in overtime hours if we don't really need to have them because we have more staff working on the front lines through our successes.

Yes, we have worked with our CEOs. We have asked them to make proposals. Some are things we can just do, and others need more discussion on what they would actually look like. Our CEOs are very proactive in working on the front line and working with these people who may have a change in opportunity. What we have learned from past experiences, both across the aisle and here, is that it's very important to socialize, communicate, and chat with people on the front line who have very positive suggestions. We receive lots of emails with positive suggestions. That's our plan forward. Thank you.

**Mr. Hogan** (Woodstock-Hartland, PC): Thank you, Madam Speaker. The plan forward seems to be somewhat flexible, based on some of the other answers we've heard this morning.

In the past few weeks, the Holt government has caused chaos and confusion with nurses. Now, it has caused what amounts to a hiring freeze for administrative positions in Horizon Health. What impact is this going to have on New Brunswickers who need health care? We are waiting to see what this is going to do. We have seen some short-term impacts of the Holt government cuts in education. We fear the impacts of the Holt government's cuts to child welfare, just as we fear the impacts of the Holt government's cuts to health care. I'd like to ask the minister this: Has he ordered his department to impose an internal hiring freeze or to implement any budget cuts? Thank you.

**Hon. Mr. Dornan** (Saint John Portland-Simonds, Minister of Health, L): Madam Speaker, to the member opposite, I'm not sure whether you are referring to the Department of Health or one of our groupings, RHAs. We have not ordered the CEOs to do anything in terms of hiring freezes. We have instructed them to communicate and speak with people who work in our hospitals so that there is no autocratic change or movement of people. We want to seek help from these people in deciding what would be the win-win-win opportunity—the win for the employee, the win for the people of New Brunswick, and the win for the Department of Health. That's our direction moving forward. Thank you.

## SERVICE DELIVERY

**Mr. Coon** (Fredericton Lincoln, Leader, G): Thank you, Madam Speaker. I've been reading the *Story of Transformation in Youth Mental Health in the Province of New Brunswick*. It was written by Dr. Bill Morrison and Dr. Patricia Peterson from the University of New Brunswick's Health & Education group. They were instrumental in designing the framework for integrated service delivery for child and youth mental health, also known as ISD.

It began in 2010 with two pilot projects, one in the Acadian Peninsula and the other in Charlotte County. These projects, respectively, doubled and tripled the number of youth actually receiving the help they needed and entirely eliminated the waiting lists. The

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program was rolled out province-wide and implemented through the creation of child and youth teams. My question for the minister is this: Since she seems to be terminating the ISD program, what kind of evaluation was done to make that decision? Will she table that report?

**Hon. Mr. McKee, K.C.** (Moncton Centre, Minister of Justice; Attorney General; Minister responsible for Addictions and Mental Health Services; L): Thank you, Madam Speaker, and thank you to the leader of the third party for bringing forward this question regarding ISD. ISD is a very important tool that has been implemented in our schools. It's something that my father brought forward and advocated for back in 2009 when he commissioned a report for mental health services in the province, *Together into the Future*.

What I can say is that the decisions that are being made regarding ISD are not to cut the program. It's a framework, not a program. It's a framework that will continue to be in place. It's a guiding principle. The goal has always been to ensure that services are coordinated, integrated, and centred on the needs of youth. A social worker, for example, working in a school will continue to do the same work they've always done. They might not answer to a child and youth team. They might answer to the school principal, but the guiding principle remains.

The work continues to be done, and we are ensuring that every child in this province will get the services they need when they need them.

**Mr. Coon** (Fredericton Lincoln, Leader, G): Madam Speaker, it's clear that this government is terminating the child and youth teams, which implement these programs, and that there was no evaluation or rationale for doing so. The teams are assigned to provide services to a cluster of schools and communities in a given region. They work closely with the schools and service members of school-based student service teams. They provide a full range of services within the school setting and within the community context.

To me, it was a jaw-dropping decision. This government is effectively terminating the child and youth teams in this province in order to send team members employed by the school districts into the classroom. This will fragment, silo, and reduce mental health services and supports to children and youth, returning to the bad old days of fragmented services. My question is this: How can the minister of mental health and addictions possibly support this regressive decision to cut the child and youth teams?

**Hon. Mr. McKee, K.C.** (Moncton Centre, Minister of Justice; Attorney General; Minister responsible for Addictions and Mental Health Services; L): Thank you, Madam Speaker. I want to start off by saying that we are committed to working together between departments. That is ongoing, and we have broken down silos with the ISD framework. That guiding principle will continue to remain in place. Frontline staff, as I said, will continue to deliver care across our schools and communities, and the quality of service will continue to be a top priority. The guiding principles remain. Silos have been broken down. We don't want kids to have to retell their stories multiple times. That's why this was put in

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place. It's been done in the Francophone sector for a number of years now. It has continued to work well in that sector. The Anglophone sector will adopt that as well.

What I can say is that we will monitor the implementation of this new policy. We will evaluate and make sure that access continues to be available at the earliest opportunity to ensure that kids get the help they need.

[Translation]

**Mr. Coon** (Fredericton Lincoln, Leader, G): Madam Speaker, child and youth teams, which provide integrated services to children and young people with mental health problems, have changed young people's lives in all regions of the province.

The Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development hasn't provided any evidence that would justify eliminating child and youth teams. She hasn't justified returning to the fragmented service delivery system that existed in the past either.

I don't want the minister to repeat that she wants to focus on the classroom. I want her answer to be about students' mental health. How will her plan improve the well-being of students who are fighting poverty, mental illness, and the judicial system?

**Hon. C. Johnson** (Moncton South, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Yes, again, I will reiterate that we want resources to be close to young people. When young people are struggling, with mental health, psychological distress, or anything else, they will turn to the people around them. That is what we want.

## CONTRACTS

**Ms. M. Johnson** (Carleton-Victoria, PC): Thank you, Madam Speaker.

[Original]

Madam Speaker, we know that the Department of Social Development relies heavily on private and non-profit organizations to deliver essential services, from senior care to housing supports and disability services. However, there is limited transparency around the way these contracts are awarded and monitored.

My question to the minister is this: How many of the department's current service delivery contracts are sole-sourced, and will the minister commit to immediately publishing a full list of active contracts along with their service standards and performance benchmarks?

**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, thank you for the question. The members here know

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that I come from a community lens. I see the incredible value we get when we work closely and equitably with our community partners.

When I first became Minister of Social Development, one of the first things I did, other than travel the province to start checking in with folks to see how they're doing on the front lines, was really talk to community partners across this province. One of the first things I did was grab a spreadsheet on whom we fund and how we fund. What does that look like? I'm just starting to go through that list now. It's quite extensive. We have a lot of incredible community partners that are doing a lot of incredible work.

To answer the member's question, I think the question was whether we are willing to publish that list. It's something that I'll take back to the team, and we'll talk about why that hasn't been done before. Perhaps it has been done before and I'm not aware of it. I'm happy to go back and talk to the team about it to see whether publishing the list is something we have done before. We believe in—

**Madam Speaker** (Hon. Ms. Landry): Time.

**Ms. M. Johnson** (Carleton-Victoria, PC): Super. I have a little more homework, too. Can the minister explain what criteria are used to determine whether a contract will be sole-sourced instead of competitively tendered, especially for high-cost, high-impact services?

**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, thank you again for the question. It does sound as though I might have a little bit of homework to take on. I appreciate that.

Community partners are invaluable, and they offer supports that government often can't. Government isn't often the front line or the first folks who are right there. We can look to our community partners and see the value and impact that they are having and who they are connected with. Those are very important pieces of these conversations, and we need to be having them with our community partners.

I've said before—and I don't think it's any surprise—that I believe strongly in the work that community partners do in this province and in the work that they haven't been doing in this province, where we could have those opportunities. I think I need to go back, have that conversation with my team, and really talk about how we value the work that community partners do. How do we ensure that we are using their work equitably and make sure that the impact those community partners have is being valued?

**Ms. M. Johnson** (Carleton-Victoria, PC): Thank you, Madam Speaker. I'm always excited to hear that the minister is willing to go back to her team and ask the hard questions. That's what it's all about.

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Given the public funding involved, will the minister commit to tabling annual performance evaluations for contracted providers so that New Brunswickers can actually see whether targets for outcomes are being met?

**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, reports are most often available. I don't know of any that aren't available. We ask our community partners to show their outcomes and show their objectives. What are we working on together? How are they connecting to the overall plan? What is their impact? If the member opposite is asking a question about whether the reports will be publicized... I have been a community partner myself, and we always had to show what we were doing, what impact we were making, and what outcomes we were providing.

Now, with regard to contracts that the department would have with partners, I think, again, this is something that I'll go back and talk about with the team. To my knowledge, we don't talk about or share what our contracts look like with other partners. Is there a reason we don't do that?

I'm happy to go back to the team and have that conversation. Thank you.

[Translation]

## EDUCATION

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

[Original]

I'm going to go back to the Education Minister once again. I asked this question once. I'll ask it a little differently to see whether I get a different answer. Or maybe I'll wait until she goes out to the media, and maybe we'll get the answer then. I asked her point-blank: What is the plan for the positions from which government is removing teachers? What is the plan for coverage for those positions?

Whether or not the minister is aware, the reality is that the folks in these positions within the districts have highly specialized skills that they need to do those jobs. Is the government going to cut those positions? Is it going to retrain people for those positions? What is its plan? I want answers from the minister because that will help inform the districts about what they need to do with their budgets, which are really not budgets because they're negotiable. Perhaps the minister can tell me that.



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**Hon. C. Johnson** (Moncton South, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker. I'm going to keep this short. Basically, it's collaboration, and when we collaborate, we don't come in with direction. That's not collaboration. That's a directive; that's non-collaborative, and it's heavy-handed. That's not what we're doing.

We have a plan, an idea, and a vision. We're working with the districts. It takes time. That's what we're doing. We'll land on something. We'll land on something good, but it will take time because we're collaborating, something that is apparently foreign to the members on the other side of the House.

[*Translation*]

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