



Report on Education

from the Deputy Minister of Education

April 7, 2006

The Working of Government – The Estimates Debate

We spent most of last week in the Legislature in the estimates debate or in preparation for the estimates debate. Estimates is something I knew nothing about until joining government and I thought you might be interested in this event.

Estimates occurs annually when the government puts forward its education budget for the following year and the Opposition gets the opportunity to question spending priorities, programs and plans. During the estimates, the Minister is assisted by staff. The debate is televised or webcast. Usually only the Minister can be seen on screen although you may see staff from time to time. This year, the staff assisting the Minister throughout the estimates included Ruth Wittenberg, Assistant Deputy Minister, Management Services; Keith Miller, Lead Director, Funding; Rick Davis, Superintendent, Liaison; and me. A number of other lead directors were also in the House to contribute their able assistance from time to time as particular topics arose.

It is interesting to reflect on the topics canvassed in estimates as it demonstrates the initiatives of the Ministry that attract the attention of the Opposition. Not surprisingly, Class Size and Composition and the workings of the Roundtable were discussed at some length. The Opposition brought examples of class organization to the House to illustrate concerns with class size and composition. Two classes were described in the House, one from School District #8 (Kootenay Lake) and one from School District #72 (Campbell River). Based on the description offered it sounded as if both classes would present intolerable learning situations. Once investigated, however, it turns out that both classes were purposefully structured to provide the best learning environments possible for all students, including a number of students with special needs. Both classes had additional supports and resources to ensure student learning. In one case, a class of 23 shared three

teachers and a full time teacher assistant. The discussion of this issue in the House served to illustrate how teachers and administrators in schools carefully and professionally structure classes to support students.

Following are a number of issues discussed during the debate. It is interesting to note the differing views about the way schools are organized.

- **School Planning Councils** – The Opposition raised the issue of “volunteer fatigue” and expressed doubt about the effectiveness of School Planning Councils particularly in view of the BCTF’s plan to withdraw from participation.
- **Student Centered Leadership** – Referred to by the Opposition as School Based Budgeting, there was extensive discussion of the piloting of this organizational model. The Minister explained that a number of districts have volunteered to pursue this approach believing that the closer decisions are made to students and the classrooms, the greater the potential impact on student learning. The Opposition expressed concerns regarding inequities that may result between schools.
- **Accountability Contracts** – The Opposition questioned the need for each district to submit an accountability contract and pointed to the high level of consistency in the 60 contracts submitted. The Minister underlined the importance of autonomy and conversations about student achievement in school and districts. There are important differences in the accountability contracts that make them unique to districts. And yes, all districts have a goal focused on literacy, as they should.
- **Collection of Data** – The Opposition expressed concern with respect to the collection of data and the time spent studying it. The Opposition critic said, “Why are we collecting this data....Why don’t you just let us take the problems as we see them and solve them?” The Minister responded, “Accountability contracts are about looking

at and examining the data thoroughly. The reason you do that and the reason you collect the information and create the accountability contract, is so you can shape the plan based on the best information and evidence.”

- **Independent School Funding** – The Opposition was critical because independent school funding increased at a higher rate than public school funding. The Minister pointed out this difference was a result of growth in the independent school enrollment. Also, each time public school funding is increased, independent school funding increases as independent schools are funded as a portion of public schools.
- **Roundtable Membership** – The Opposition advocated for a seat at the Roundtable for CUPE. The Minister noted that the current participants at the Roundtable had agreed to maintain the current membership for one year and then review the membership for subsequent years.
- **Reduction in Teacher Librarian staffing levels** – There was concern expressed that the number of teacher librarians has been drastically reduced since 2001. The Minister expressed her view that these staffing decisions and priorities were best determined locally. She said, “..we believe that schools have to make choices about what’s best to serve their students in this province. I actually have confidence in educators and parents and teachers working together to determine how best to serve those students... We fundamentally believe that’s the way for us to manage the system.”
- **The Graduation Portfolio** – The Opposition raised the issue of the graduation portfolio and questioned the level of support students were receiving to aid in their completion. The Minister expressed strong support for this graduation requirement noting that it gives each student the opportunity to tell their story about themselves. She cited several examples of portfolios which she has seen and outlined the supports in place to assist students.

Throughout the estimates debate, a number of MLAs rose with specific questions about their constituencies. These questions often cause us to contact districts for assistance in finding the answers. Often these will deal with specific capital projects but more general questions are asked as well. I find it interesting that many of the issues discussed in the Legislature at this time are the same issues that you discuss in your schools with colleagues, parents and students. Through these debates in the Legislature, public policy respecting the operation of schools is developed, changed and refined.

Next Week – Knowing that you will have a long Easter weekend, there will be no Deputy’s Education Report next Friday.